



BANNER OF THE STARS

THE TIES THAT BIND

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ILLUSTRATOR: TOSHIHIRO ONO

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Welcome Back to the Abh Empire!

Welcome “back”?

Yes — to fully enjoy Banner of the Stars, you need to read the three-volume Crest of the Stars first. (It’s soon to be out in print omnibus form!) It explains the ins and outs of the fictional future MORIOKA has crafted, as well as our protagonists’ backgrounds and shared bond. More to the point, it’s a great story, and worth your time.

For those of you who have read Crest, but would like a refresher:

Whenever a vocab word of the Abh language, “Baronh,” appears, it will be in *italics* (with the English meaning in parentheses). Whenever that particular word appears again past the first time in the original text, it will be replaced with its English-meaning counterpart in **bold** (but won’t be bolded if the word didn’t have the Baronh for it next to it in the original text). This is to make sure the book is accessible without losing some of that lovely “conlang” (constructed language) flavor! That being said, if a Baronh word has already been introduced in the English version of Crest, it won’t be reintroduced in Banner. This translation assumes you have read Crest.

Baronh words are spelled weirdly. The character whose English-language spelling is “Lafier” is spelled *Lamhirh* in Baronh (“mh” makes an “f” sound, and the “rh” is actually a rolling “r”). *Ghintec*, meanwhile, is pronounced “Jint” (as the “c” and “ec” at the ends of many nouns are silent). This translation will largely be making use of accessibility-spellings for character names. Having to constantly remind oneself “*Lamhirh*” is pronounced LAFEERR would probably prove a tad immersion-breaking for some readers.

Banner of the Stars is ongoing (its sixth volume having been released in 2018), and according to MORIOKA, Crest of the Stars was something of an introductory primer to this, the “story proper.” Each volume of Banner is its own episode, a snapshot in the lives of our protagonists at a certain point in the grueling

decades of galactic warfare. As such, please know that unlike the individual volumes of Crest, Volume I of Banner is a *self-contained story* in addition to being a part of an overarching saga. Pick it up and read at your leisure!

We join our protagonists three years after the main events of Crest, in the year 955 I.H. (Imperial History)...

Once, there was a traveler stricken by illness, suffering by the roadside. A man passed by, saying unto the traveler: "I see that you are sick."

The traveler, for his part, had not yet made any indication he desired aid, yet the man said thus. He continued: "You don't need to say anything. Leave everything to me."

And so the man proceeded to sermonize at length, the gist of his sermon being that a man had only to lead a life of discipline so as not to fall ill. Satisfied with his one-sided exhortation, the man left the invalid in the dust.

That man's name was the United Humankind.

The traveler's condition, meanwhile, grew worse and worse. Eventually, his consciousness was beginning to fade. Suddenly, in a moment of lucidity, he was greeted with the sight of a stunningly beautiful lady squatting over him, her eyes shining with curiosity.

"Don't just stare; help me," rasped the traveler hoarsely.

"You'd like me to help you?" said the beautiful woman, as though she thought him strange for it. "You'd really, truly like me to help you?"

The traveler earnestly insisted that lying sprawled on the floor was not, in fact, a hobby of his, and that he was ailing sick. He even told her outright that he desired salvation from the bottom of his heart.

The woman, having taken some time to hear him describe his troubles, nodded, stood back up, and left. Soon enough, she returned with a veritable hospital's worth of doctors and nurses. (Don't ask how she'd been able to pull off such a feat; she simply could.)

The beauty's name? The Humankind Empire of Abh.

Excerpted from a political fable circulated on the planet Midgrat.

BANNER OF THE STARS I: The Ties That Bind

Synopsis of CREST OF THE STARS

Jint, a boy who (through no volition of his own) became a noble of the vast interstellar empire of the Abh when his home planet became a territory of said empire, boarded a spaceship headed to the imperial capital in order to fulfill his obligation to serve as a starpilot in the Abh Star Forces.

On that spaceship, he got to know a girl named Lafier, who happened not only to be a Star Forces starpilot, but also a royal princess of the Empire. After narrowly escaping several ordeals and incidents, they managed to return to the capital safe and sound. Three years of student life later, Jint now finds himself back alongside Lafier, having been appointed to her ship as a quartermaster linewing starpilot.

Characters

Lafier (*Lamhirh*) ... Captain of the assault ship *Basrogrh*, and the Empress's granddaughter.

Jint (*Ghintec*) ... Clerk on the *Basrogrh*, and the Count of Hyde.

Sobash (*Sobach*) ... Navigator on the *Basrogrh*.

Ecryua (*Aicryac*) ... Gunner and communications officer on the *Basrogrh*.

Samson (*Samsonn*) ... Inspector supervisor on the *Basrogrh*.

Atosryua (*Atausryac*) ... Assault Unit Commander, and Lafier's superior.

Doosanyuh (*Dusanh*) ... Crown Prince of the Abh Empire, and the overall Commander-in-Chief of the invasion fleet.

Kenesh (*Cénéch*) ... Overall Chief of Staff of the invasion fleet.

Sporr (*Sporh*)

... Commander-in-Chief of Fleet 1.

Cfadiss

... Chief of Staff under Sporr.

Neleth (*Nélaith*) ... Commander-in-Chief of the Aptic Defensive Fleet.

Nefeh (*Néféc*)

... Chief of Staff of the Defensive Fleet.

Prologue

Fully absorbed in the task of examining his domain, sat he.

At first, he did not much care for the pungently sweet odor hanging in the air, but once he got used to it, it was no big deal.

He fancied taking a lap around his territory.

No enemies in sight.

He looked up at the door he'd departed from. Though to him illegible, it read: "*GARICH DREUR HAÏDER*, CASTLE OF THE LITTLEST **NOBLE** IN THE **EMPIRE**." It was the Manor of the Count of Hyde.

He sat in a well-behaved fashion, and urged for the door to be opened for him. He had been sleepy for a good while.

Yet no sign came of the door's imminent opening.

Several times he prompted for it to be opened. At last, he resorted to growling in protest. But it opened not. It appeared the housemate was away from home.

With nothing else he could do, he decided to once again commence patrolling the lay of the land. He had discovered a handful of lovely crevices. Surely he could simply enjoy a nice nap nestling into one of them.

With his short fur, solid and sturdy limbs and torso, largish head, and relatively round face, he was the picture of a pedigreed and honorable Abh cat.

One characteristic of so-called Abh cats was the variety of colors and patterns they came in. The Abh language of Baronh had many a word for feline fur patterns. He was a *ctilüarh*, a "striped." That is to say, he was base-brown, with dark stripes all over.

While his mother had sported a fetching stump-tail, his father hadn't, so his own tail was long. Tail standing upright, he began ambling forward, his gait exuding the calm poise of a galactic overlord.

It had only been 1,500 years since his breed had been dubbed *deucec*, or “Abh cat.” His lineage traced its ancestry to the housecats that lived on a certain arch-shaped archipelago on Earth.

When the humans set off for the sea of stars, they brought along his ancestors as a matter of course, and so they settled on more planets than one.

On one such planet, they crossed paths with the artificially engineered bio-droids with blue hair and *frocragh* spatio-sensory perception — the Abh.

In some ways, that fateful encounter was actually a reunion. After all, the humans who had made the Abh also hailed from the selfsame archipelago the cats did.

A few dozen cats had been handed to the Abh, who, at that time, were flying through space on an enormous city-ship. The largest **interstellar vessel** ever built by human hands, it proved to be nothing less than the ideal hunting ground to their feline friends, for rats and mice had long ago been allowed to come aboard.

Of course, the Abh had had methods of thoroughly exterminating pests and vermin on hand already. The most often used means was to evacuate the humans before sucking the air out. However, though it was the simplest way to do it, it was also the most over-the-top, and came with its fair share of risks. Moreover, no matter how many times they implemented this solution, more would sneak their way in every time they engaged in exchange with a **landworld**. It didn't take long at all for the Abh to conclude that letting their cats follow their instincts constituted the most elegant measure to keep the numbers of unwanted stowaways down.

Even in this current age, long since the Abh obtained faster-than-light travel and constructed a mighty interstellar empire, their feline fellowship continued unwavering. Abhs even purposefully set prey rodents loose upon building new structures to dispel their cats' boredom, (though obviously not every time).

The Abh did keep other animals, but these little carnivores were the Abh's favorite pet. Their most appreciated and welcomed trait was how they maintained a certain distance from their owners.

Naturally, cats themselves had no concept of “owners.” To him, the human

who lived and slept in his room was his housemate, and nothing more...

He did rather enjoy his housemate's company.

The housemate did, at times, forget to prepare his meals — that much was true. Defending the realm from hostile outside forces was his end of the bargain; the housemate's was fixing the food. Yet he was a magnanimous malkin, and quite capable of overlooking such shortcomings.

There was another act of his housemate's, however, that he could not abide by. The fiendish act of sudsing-up his beautiful coat with bubbles, and then to top it all off, dumping tepid water over him. That alone he was not magnanimous enough to forgive.

Regardless, he found he could be at ease when his housemate was around. His throat felt good when the human stroked it.

Furthermore, he'd become able to sniff out whenever the housemate was plotting soon to spring the vile sudsy act of villainy, so in that small way his life had taken a turn for the even pleasanter. When he was serious about keeping himself concealed, the housemate's sluggish arm could never, ever take hold of him.

The alluring crevice held its mouth open in invitation. It was just the sort of gap that could be hiding a mouse or two.

In one refined motion, he leapt at the hole, and crawled through the narrow opening. In the wide space he found himself in, (or at least, wide in the eyes of a cat), there were no mice.

There was instead, one human, seated in a chair at the room's center. It wasn't the housemate, but for some reason it smelled familiar. He purred and rubbed himself against its legs.

"Dyaho." He understood, albeit dimly, that this specific mash of sounds humans uttered seemed to be his name.

Out of the blue, he was picked up by the scruff. Memories rushed back to him of his time as a kitten carried by his mother, and his limbs drooped languidly down.

“It’s been three years, yet I see you still haven’t a stoic bone in your body.” The human peered at his face. He had a vague sense he’d been insulted somehow, but Dyaho cared little. Once he was curled in its lap, he felt the pull of his drowsiness return, and his eyes closed.

After a while of nearly drifting off, the human who was offering him its lap spoke again, and so Dyaho’s ears pricked up. “Jint, your cat is here.”

“Jint” was his housemate’s name. Dyaho looked up, and confirmed that that human standing there was his housemate.

“Ah, my bad. Little guy been annoying you?” he spoke.

“It’s no matter; my shift is rather uneventful,” responded the human named Lafier despondently. “I must say, however, that I’m shocked by your lack of sense. We’re about to head into the battlefield. Wouldn’t it be cruel to bring the cat?”

“It’ll be fine. When all of the crew abandons ship, I’ll be responsible and take him with me.”

“Must you say such foreboding things?” said Lafier, her tone barbed. “Besides, that’s not what I’m saying. It’s just that he has no romantic prospects here, nor mice to hunt. That’s why I’d feel sorry for him.”

“What else can I do? My starpilot quarters on this **assault ship** named the *Basrogrh* (“BAHSROYR”) is the only ‘house’ I’ve got.”

“You’d need to give it to somebody to look after for the time being.”

“It’s not against military regulations, is it?”

“Only because no one with sense would do such a thing,” said Lafier sharply. “The atmosphere aboard ship would turn more... lax.”

“Well, I hear Abhs used to take their kids onto battleships.”

“That was during a time when there was no line dividing battle from everyday life,” said Lafier. “But that was then, and this is now... At least, for now.”

“All right, all right. I’ll drop Dyaho off in *Lacmhacarh* when I get the chance. Only, I can’t think of a place to leave him. All of my **quartermaster academy** buddies are on the warfront.”

“If you’re counting on my **royal palace**, why don’t you come out and say it?” Lafier teased.

“You’re a life saver. I totally was counting on you.”

The topic of their conversation was picked up by the scruff once more. His rest perturbed, he issued a light moan in objection.

“C’mon, Dyaho,” said the housemate, holding him to his chest.

Dyaho didn’t understand the first thing about this tendency of his housemate’s. A rational being would only say the words “come on” if they expected the addressee to do so of their own accord. Yet the human had vocalized that sentiment only after scooping him up, an action that took no account of his will.

“Looks like your aunt doesn’t want your company,” said Jint, striking up a conversation (with whom, he knew not, for it clearly wasn’t aimed toward him).

“Stupid,” pouted Lafier at Jint’s little dig.

Though Dyaho was unaware, both he and Lafier were born in the same **orbital mansion**, the **Royal Palace of Clybh**. Dyaho’s lineage had lived there since his grandmother, Horia’s, time.

When Lafier was very young, she’d once been made to believe that her genetic mother was Horia, the cat. The lie was her father’s doing — a silly little fib, he claimed — but she had been young enough to believe it, and the resultant trauma was no small affair. Of course, if Horia really were her mother, that would make Dyaho her nephew.

“You’ll be returning home after three whole years, Dyaho. You psyched, or what?” said the housemate.

But Dyaho had no recollection of the **Royal Palace of Clybh**. He was familiar only with the student dormitory of the **quartermaster academy** he and his housemate had lived in, and he remembered its every nook and cranny.

That being said, any place was fine by him, so long as there were lovely little holes to explore. And if his new home housed chubby rats, all the grander.

Dyaho nodded off to sleep in the housemate’s arms, and dreamt dreams of

bustling droves of mice.

Chapter 1: The *Ciïoth Apticer* (Aptic Star System)

The star called *Apticec* (Aptic) was an ordinary yellow star, surrounded by twelve none-too-notable planets. The third of those planets was fit for habitation, its population just under 100 million.

Though part of the United Humankind, traveling a mere 5,000 *cédlairh* planar miles through **planar space** would take one into the sphere of influence of the power the UH was officially at war with, the **Humankind Empire of Abh**.

It was no flight of fancy to call the planet's position precarious. It was not, however, alone in that predicament, as many other star systems faced similar circumstances, which was the reason there was no fleet stationed nearby, and all that existed by the **portal** was an orbital fortress.

When the Abh invaded, the fortress's efforts were valiant and worthy of mention, but it was destroyed before their overwhelming firepower.

When the fortress's debris fell into orbit around Aptic III, the planet's Premier, Macrit Tallas, thought to try speaking to the commander of the enemy fleet.

"...As such, I shall take this chance to make our will clear to you. That is, not my personal will, but the will of all who reside in the Aptic Star System, as is my duty. I acknowledge that, given you and we are in a state of war, I perhaps cannot blame you for invading this system. But I say unto you, in this moment of soaring emotion, shaking as we stand, that it is the duty of a member of the United Humankind to bear such strife, and that we bear that duty gladly..."

The Premier of Aptic's speech reverberated through the **Commander's Bridge** of the **fleet flagship**, the **patrol ship** *Lachcaü*.

Listening intently sat the Commander-in-Chief, whose hair was a blue blaze. She stared at Tallas's hologram, her red eyes burning, but the only real sign of her irritation was the way her fingertips were ever-so-slightly tapping at the armrests.

Chief of Staff *Cfadiss* was surprised. *She's being so patient.* He hadn't thought

patience was a concept his commander had ever heard of.

“...It may be the case that our system hasn’t the power, alone, to break your nation’s blockade over our space. Yet we will not simply sit idly by, waiting for our Peacekeepers to passively taste defeat. This land is our land!” The Premier raised a fist. “When you Abhs touch down onto this surface, I promise you we will show you what we can do. We will fight, and keep fighting, until our Peacekeepers have expelled your fleet. You will never rule over the surface of Aptic III!”

When the Premier paused for breath, the commander simply grinned. From her venom-red lips, came cordial words of encouragement. “Please, try your best.”

Confusion crept on Tallas’s face. He opened his mouth to reply, but she paid no heed and cut the transmission.

“I feel sorry for the Premier; he spoke so passionately, but it was just such tedious tripe.” Then **Commodore** Sporr Arohn Sekpaht Penezh, Archduchess of *Laitpanh*, stood up from her seat.

“**Chief of Staff**, was there any change in the situation while I was busy listening to the man?”

“The astrospace of Aptic III has been totally secured,” reported Cfadiss. “Seventy percent of the fuel of the **antimatter fuel factory** by Aptic’s sun has been taken. Furthermore, our own *iodh hoca* (mobile antimatter fuel factory) has already completed 62% of its projected deployment. The *tymh* (propellant refueling station) to be set up on Aptic VI has gotten 0.17% of the way there, it seems the propellant refueling station’s installation will take the longest amount of time, at around 218 hours hence...”

“So it’s all going according to plan,” Sporr cut in.

“Yes.”

“From now on, you can just say ‘nothing’s changed.’ Don’t you agree it would be best if you learned how to get through things in life more *concisely*?”

“Understood. I’ll be careful from now on,” Cfadiss nodded grudgingly.

“Oh, you’re no fun, **Chief of Staff**,” Sporr frowned.

What does she even want out of me? Why am I here? Cfadiss lamented inwardly, his mind turning once again to working out the contents of that letter of transfer.

Naturally, he didn’t actually expect to be able to send out a letter of transfer in reality.

According to **Star Forces** tradition, a superior could not bury a subordinate’s transfer request. After all, a **starpilot** who didn’t want to be there was just a liability. In addition, the higher-ups could use the knowledge of how well a commander kept hold of their subordinates as information by which to evaluate their performance.

But in the three years he had been under Sporr’s command, Cfadiss had stumbled across a startling truth — Sporr harbored him no ill will whatsoever. Were she to receive a transfer request, though, she *would*.

He would assuredly be transferred elsewhere, but only the Personnel Department could know *when*. Cfadiss was loath to so much as imagine what might transpire in the period between his request and his transferral.

“**Communications Officer**, call up the *Descfac*,” ordered Sporr.

Before long, the **commandant** of the **recon sub-fleet** *Descfac*, **Associate Commodore Rosech**, appeared before the **Commander-in-Chief’s Seat** in hologram form.

“**Commandant**, are preparations for departure ready?”

“Completely, **Commander-in-Chief**,” Rosesh replied concisely.

“Very good,” nodded Sporr, shooting Cfadiss a glance that screamed *you should take a leaf from his book*. “Be a dear and depart at once.”

“Yes.” Rosesh saluted. “As planned, the **recon sub-fleet** *Descfac* will scout out the *Miscerec* Star System.”

Sporr nodded wordlessly a second time, and the hologram cut out.

“**Communications Officer**, arrange a **carrycraft** for *Fiac Glaharérr* (His Highness the Commander-in-Chief).”

“Roger.” The communications officers looked up at her. “Do we have anything in particular to report?”

“No,” said Sporr, shaking her head. “Everything’s going swimmingly. The tedium of it.”

“All ships of the **recon sub-fleet** *Descfac* have set sail,” reported the **exploration staff officer**.

The **Humankind Empire of Abh**’s great counterattack would commence here, in the Aptic Star System, in this, the year 955 **I.H.**

It had been three years since the Three Nations Alliance (comprised of the United Humankind, the Greater Alkont Republic, and the People’s Sovereign Stellar Union) had attacked via two of the **portals** in the **Ileesh Monarchy**, one of the **Eight Monarchies** that comprised the **Humankind Empire of Abh**.

The **Empire** had taken the enemy on and won for the time being, but they had lost large swaths of territory within the **Ileesh Monarchy** to the enemy, and it had yet to be recovered.

Both sides of the hostilities had sustained serious damage, and for three years, neither power could mobilize any large-scale forces. The best they could manage up until now was the small skirmishes that attended the recon-in-force of the star systems near the boundary lines of their respective zones of influence.

This three-year lull was also time enough to rebuild the fleets and gather information. By analyzing the **compucrystals** recovered from the captured enemy ships, the **Empire** uncovered where the two portals that had been opened up in the **Ileesh Monarchy**, the *Saudec Ceutesocnbina Céïcr* (Portal 193 of *Céïch* [Caysh]) and the *Saudec Gagamata Sibr* (Portal 882 of *Sibh* [Seev]), led to.

From the **Central Sector** of the **Milky Way Portal-belts** all the way to its **Seventh Ring**, lay the constituent interstellar empires of the Three Nations Alliance, which had declared war on the **Empire**, as well as the Hania Federation, which remained neutral.

In the spaces between those powers lay seven of the eight monarchies that

made up the Empire, the exception being the **Ileesh Monarchy**.

Both Portals 193 of Caysh and 882 of Seev connected to a sector located between the ***Siurgzedéc (Syoorgzede)*** and ***Rasisec (Raseess)*** Monarchies — a sector controlled by the United Humankind.

And so **Military HQ** cooked up a scheme to sever the sector from the TNA.

Starting from the ***Siurgzedéc Monarchy's Dreuhynh Biscatr*** (Countdom of *Biscaith*), they'd capture star systems such as Aptic and Miskehrr and establish a main supply line across them. Then they would take the star systems near the main supply line, and in so doing build a line of defense. In the end, the line would run all the way to the ***Laicerhynh Üerér*** (Duchy of *Üeréc* [Wehreh]) in the **Rasess Monarchy**. In addition, they would try to close up the now-isolated sector.

The name of the operation was *Rainibh* (Phantom Flame).

The composition of the *Byrec Rainibr* (Phantom Flame Fleet), the strategy's fleet of enactment was as follows:

Ranking order of the **Phantom Flame Fleet**

Commander-in-Chief: Imperial Admiral Abliar (Crown Prince and King of Barkeh)

Chief of Staff: Star Forces Admiral Cénéch (Rüé Laicerec [Imperial Duchess])

Advance Recon Corps (*Byrec Casna Rainibr* [Phantom Flame Fleet 1])

Commander-in-Chief: Commodore Sporr (Archduchess of *Laitpanh*)

Chief of Staff: Kilo-Commander Cfadiss (knight first-class)

Right-side Invasion Corps (*Byrec Mata Rainibr* [Phantom Flame Fleet 2])

Commander-in-Chief: Grand Commodore Lulaimh (Rüé Læbec [Imperial Marquess])

Chief of Staff: Associate Commodore Tlirh (Lymh Sezlainr [Baron of Sezlainh [Sezlenyuh]])

Nucleus Invasion Corps (*Byrec Bina Rainibr* [Phantom Flame Fleet 3])

Commander-in-Chief: Imperial Admiral Abliar (serving concurrently)

Chief of Staff: Star Forces Admiral Cénéch (serving concurrently)

Left-side Invasion Corps (*Byrec Gona Rainibr* [Phantom Flame Fleet 4])

Commander-in-Chief: Grand Commodore Cotponic (*Rüé Lymh İarlymec* [Imperial Baron Noble Princess])

Chief of Staff: Associate Commodore Sescath (*Rüé Lymh* [Imperial Baron])

Rear Supply Corps (*Byrec Lyna Rainibr* [Phantom Flame Fleet 5])

Commander-in-Chief: Star Forces Admiral Lecemh (**Imperial Duke**)

Chief of Staff: Commodore Cic (*İarlucec Laicerec Gambr* [Dukedom of *Gambh* Noble Prince])

With one hundred and fifty **sub-fleets** in all as their main military force, they also had seventy **sub-fleets'** worth of combat ships that were part of the **training fleet** (in that they had yet to be appointed to specific formations) making up the rear.

This time, the **Imperial Star Forces** had taken the front lines.

"**Commander-in-Chief**, the star system's **Premier** is asking to speak to you again," reported the **communications officer**.

"His Excellency still has something to say?" Sporr's blaze-blue eyebrows furrowed. "I've lent his idle grumbling an ear already."

"He may not think what he has to say is 'idle grumbling,'" suggested Cfadiss.

"What else could it be?" She cocked her head in puzzlement. "Fine, then. **Chief of Staff**, ask the Premier what his business is. I'm a tad busy."

For a brief moment, Cfadiss stood there. "...Understood." Reluctantly, Cfadiss turned to the Communications Staff Officer. "Send the transmission to my **wristgear**, if you would."

Soon, video of the star system's chief of government floated up above his **wristgear**.

"Your Excellency," he said, "I'm terribly sorry, but our **Commander-in-Chief** is

indisposed at the moment, so it's fallen on me to ask how we might help you."

"And you are?" frowned the Premier, with an air of suspicion.

"My name is Cfadiss, and I am the **Chief of Staff** here."

"Good, that's just what I needed," said Tallas, surprising him. "Before I speak to Her Excellency the **Commander-in-Chief** again, there's something I'd like to make sure of."

"What might that be?"

"You see, I fear that your machine translation might be malfunctioning."

"I do not believe that is the case," said Cfadiss. "Besides, I can assure you we understand the words of you and your people without it. For us, using machine translation as an intermediary is merely to establish a fair playing field."

"But how can that be?" sniped the Premier. "I made it clear, on our end, that we plan to resist you to the bitter end."

"Correct. I, too, heard you say as much." Upon hearing that, Tallas's expression doubtful, his confidence deflated.

"Then... perhaps it is our machine that's on the fritz. Because according to it, Her Excellency issued us words of *encouragement*."

"That is correct."

At a loss, Tallas breathed a sigh. "It's just... to put it mildly, this is a bewildering development, at least by our standards. We've made clear our intent to resist, yet the enemy commander fires back with a pat on the back."

"I completely understand," Cfadiss nodded vigorously. He felt he'd found a kindred soul in this Lander he'd only just met.

"In anticipation this day would come, I studied to deepen my grasp of Abh culture... or rather, I *thought* I'd deepened it."

You must be joking, seethed Cfadiss. It appeared Sporr's actions had been misconstrued as the typical Abh way. "Your Excellency, I don't know what you think of our race, but Abhs, too, have individual personalities. Had it been me, I would not have given you words of encouragement. In fact, it wouldn't even

occur to the average Abh to do such a thing.”

“In that case...” A shine returned to the Premier’s eyes. “Then Her Excellency, she’s... well, I don’t mean to be rude, but... she’s somewhat *eccentric*, shall we say?”

“Caution, please,” chided Cfadiss, despite thinking that was the understatement of the century. “I am a faithful subordinate of the **Commander-in-Chief**, and most crucially of all, I’m currently within her reach.”

“Forgive me. May I ask how you would have responded in her stead?”

Cfadiss immediately thought up a safe answer. “I believe I would have said, ‘by all means, do as you will.’”

Tallas’s shoulders drooped with disappointment as he clicked his tongue. “That is a problem.”

“What do you mean?”

“Are you aware of what an ‘election’ is?”

“I have read up on elections, yes...” he said, disconcerted.

“Then it will be easier to explain.” Tallas’s holographic projection leaned forward. “To be plain with you, the voting public likes a leader who stands up boldly to tyrannical invaders. Oh, but I hope I haven’t hurt your feelings by calling you ‘tyrannical invaders.’ I mean nothing more by it than to impart a strong impression.”

“We don’t intend to meddle in your affairs, no matter what you call us.” Cfadiss felt keenly that he was probably getting wrapped up in some absurd scenario, here. “What exactly are you expecting to come of all this, Your Excellency?”

“I would be the symbolic representative of our determined war of resistance.”

“Of course,” said Cfadiss warily. Not that that wariness had ever served him before.

“As such, I’d like you very much to counsel our surrender.”

“I... see...” Perhaps the situation hadn’t been that ridiculous before, but now

that the enemy was asking to be told to surrender, he had a feeling something was definitely off here.

“But if you reject our recommendation to surrender, then that will force us to take a certain level of action. Surrender will be demanded of your star system down the line, but at present, our fleet is intent on advancing forward, so we don’t actually wish to have a hand in subduing this or other **landworlds**. I’m sure you can appreciate our circumstances.”

“Yes, naturally,” said Tallas, nodding emphatically. “We’d just hope you appreciate ours as well. Not adopting any measures when there’s a fleet of warships overhead is going to be hard to explain to my constituents.”

“And that is a concern?”

The Premier’s eyes reeled wide; he could hardly believe his ears. “But of course! At this rate, our numbers will be down during the next election!”

“Ah, I see.” Though he wanted with all his heart to be freed from this back-and-forth, still he replied.

“That is why we would be most grateful if you could just respond to our declaration of resistance with a strongly worded appeal to surrender. The idea being that I then accede, thinking tearfully of the lives of the people. Do that, and I’ll have a narrative for the voters.”

“‘Strongly worded’ how, exactly?” Cfadiss responded robotically, not really caring to hear how, exactly.

“Hmm... I’d like you to pronounce that you’ll launch a savage offensive against our cities, and that that is no empty threat. I’d be even more thankful if you could throw in some discriminatory rhetoric to boot. Perhaps some slurs, along the lines of ‘land swine’ or ‘mud turtles.’”

“I’m sorry, what?” Cfadiss was unfamiliar with such colorful terms.

“‘Land swine’ and ‘mud turtles,’” Tallas repeated. “I’m certain you as Abhs must have a fair few contemptuous epithets for landworlders, so you may use any of those, as you like. Just make sure they’re sufficiently clear-cut. It’s not that my constituents are dim-witted, but there is a cultural barrier. It’s not uncommon for more euphemistic turns of phrase to get lost in translation.”

“I regret to inform you that our race doesn’t find railing against people with blunt invective all that elegant...” Suddenly, Cfadiss recovered his senses. “Hold on, Your Excellency. The Star Forces don’t actually have any vested interest in your star system’s coming elections. Consequently, we cannot cooperate with you on this matter.”

“But apart from us, there’s no other force that can shoulder the star system’s affairs of state!” Tallas carped.

“Then there’s nothing to worry about,” Cfadiss consoled him. “We need not interfere, for surely your star system’s people will make the correct choice.”

“If every eligible voter were as wise as you, then they would,” said the Premier, shaking his head with apparent dismay. “Unfortunately, the opposition candidates and their supporters don’t recognize that obvious fact...”

“At any rate, we cannot issue a recommendation to surrender,” said Cfadiss. If he continued indulging this conversation, he might end up even taking a liking to Tallas.

“Is there no room to negotiate?” Tallas entreated.

“I’m very sorry.” Pacifying the doggedly persistent Star System Premier with a few solicitous words, Cfadiss hung up and ended the transmission. He looked up from his **wristgear** and sighed.

“So,” Sporr said without a moment’s delay, “what did the Premier want, ultimately?”

Cfadiss relayed the contents of their discussion.

“I say,” said Sporr, curiosity dawning on her face. “That sounds far more engaging than my chat with him.”

A hair-raising spectacle then floated across Cfadiss’s mind. He pictured a Star Forces starpilot hurling childish threats at the enemy, slinging animal names (like “land swine” or “mud turtles”) that he’d never heard before, and wasn’t even sure existed to begin with.

Even if, for the sake of argument, the Premier’s demands were accommodated, he trusted that it wasn’t a role his **Commander-in-Chief** would

volunteer for. And he was also sure he knew who would have to do it in her place.

“Sadly, His Excellency ended up undercutting himself. I hate being deceived. As such, if he’d been honest about his intentions from the outset, we might have gotten somewhere,” she said, to Cfadiss’s relief.

“Besides,” she continued, inclining her head slightly, “**His Highness the Commander-in-Chief** will be coming later. We need to leave the recommendation to surrender to him. His Highness likes this kind of occasion more than anything. In the **Countdom of Hyde**... well, it wasn’t a **countdom** when he came, but did that star system’s administration give him a speech suggesting they abdicate their sovereignty?”

“I’m afraid not,” said Cfadiss, shaking his head.

“Well, then he did pretty well for an Abliar. He was heavy-handed, and dripping with sarcasm, but effective. Though I’m sure I would have done a more elegant job of it, myself.”

Hearing Sporr say that, he glanced at the **crest banner** of the **Archduchy of Laitpanh** hanging on the wall behind the Commander-in-Chief’s Seat. That banner displayed a few choice words, in addition to the *gatharsec* golden crow (which was as famed as the **crimson eyes of the Sporr**). They read: “We’re not happy settling for ‘**Archduke**,’ but being **Emperor** is boorish work very fit for the Abliars! We are the Sporrs!”

“What did the Premier suggest as derogatory terms for land peoples, again?” she asked.

“‘Land swine’ and ‘mud turtles.’”

“‘Land swine’ and ‘mud turtles’...” Eyes downcast, she folded her arms. A smile curled her lips. “How quaint. But they do have something of a refreshing quality, oddly enough.”

Please don’t take to those words, longed Cfadiss.

Just like the majority of Abhs, Cfadiss was areligious, but during times like these, he very much wished for there to be a divinity to pray to.

Chapter 2: The Assault Ship *Basrogrh*

The **Captain** of the **assault ship** *Basrogrh*, **Deca-Commander** *Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Lamhirh*, **Viscountess of** *Parhynh*, closed her eyes, and focused her *frocragh* spatio-sensory perception.

Right now, the *Basrogrh*, alone in its **space-time bubble**, was dashing headlong for the attack.

“Ten seconds to **space-time fusion**. Eight... Seven... Six...” resounded the voice of **Senior Vanguard Starpilot** *Sobach*.

Presently, the *Basrogrh*’s space-time was still featureless. Then, a point on the space-time bubble’s surface began seething intensely. That was the sign **space-time fusion** had commenced.

Lafier budged her left hand, which was encased in the **control gauntlet**. In response, the *Basrogrh*’s **main engine system** roared to max output.

The ship’s acceleration was coupled with rotation on the **space-time bubble**’s part.

“...Three... Two... One... **fusion**,” stated Sobash calmly.

Lafier could perceive the giant hole that had now opened on the **bubble**. Beyond it lay the enemy assault ship.

It’s approaching! Lafier revved up the attitude control systems and caused the ship to skid sideways.

Until a little while back, torrents of antiprotons had been streaking through the space in which the *Basrogrh* existed. They had lightly grazed the assault ship, but its **magnetic shield** deflected them.

Lafier fired her own **antiproton cannons**, but didn’t actually expect any of the beams to strike true. But while they didn’t connect, they did serve their purpose as a diversion.

The enemy maneuvered to the bottom-right to avoid them. Seizing on that

opening the *Basrogrh* slipped down to its flank.

“Fire the **laser cannons** at full power!” ordered Lafier.

Linewing Starpilot Aicryac, who, as the *Roïalm Lodaïrh* (Deputy Starpilot), was filling in the roles of both **communications officer** and **gunner**, worked the mobile multi-turret laser cannons and launched the offensive.

Needless to say, their target fired right back at them, yet the mobile laser cannons of assault ships were generally powerless to destroy other vessels.

Lafier had the ship shift position, pointing the warship’s bow at the enemy’s flank; she would consign it to oblivion with one blow of her **antiproton cannons**.

The enemy, however, proved swifter still, for while the ship was still undergoing attitude control, another antiproton torrent blasted diagonally from in front.

Lafier tried her best to swerve, to dodge, but there was no time.

“**Antiproton cannons** destroyed,” reported the ship’s **inspector supervisor**, *Faictodaïc Scoæmr* (Mechanics Linewing Starpilot) Samson. “Engine output down. 0.9... point eight... point seven, and falling! The **magnetic shield generators** have lost function.”

“Air’s leaking from Compartment 7; atmospheric pressure at 0.63 and dropping. No response from crew; will close bulkhead immediately,” said the ship’s **clerk**, *Faictodaïc Sazoir* (Quartermaster Linewing Starpilot) Lynn. “Bulkhead closure complete. Compartment 7 has been disposed of. Commencing pressurization of adjacent compartments.”

Lafier bit her lip. Now that her principal weapon, the **antiproton cannons**, had been taken offline, she was at the end of her tether. At this rate, all she could do was witness in vain as the enemy reared to land the finishing strike.

“**Split away from this space-time!**” Lafier took the only option left to her.

“Hurry!”

“We can’t. We won’t make it,” said Sobash.

She unconsciously clenched her fist, but the **control gauntlet** wasn’t reacting.

And together with the impact of the final blow, the lights illuminating the **bridge** suddenly surrendered to dark gloom.

“Ship has fallen. Ship has fallen...” a machine voice apprised them coldly.

“Was something the matter?” asked Lafier, as calmly as she could muster.

“As of now, no, no anomalies,” replied Samson, who stood in charge of all the ship’s equipment. “I’ll keep checking.”

“I see. Carry on then,” said Lafier, tepidly.

“**Captain**, we have a transmission,” said Ecryua.

“Put it through,” she said, then got on her feet.

A hologram of a male **starpilot** with bluish purple hair appeared before her. “My, my, **Deca-Commander** Abliar,” he said.

His name was **Hecto-Commander** *Cotcærh*, a *labésiac* (evaluator) belonging to the **training fleet**. The *Basrogrh* had traveled here to **Vobayrneh Astrobase** from *Lacmhacarh* for its familiarization voyage. This mock battle was to be the voyage’s closing exercise.

No real **antiproton cannons** were employed, of course. Feeble lasers were all they’d been trading.

The Abh’s confidence in their shipbuilding was absolute. Regardless, **interstellar ships** were each an assemblance of sensitive and delicate technologies, and that went doubly for ships of war. Defective ships were bound to come off the block every now and again. It was, in fact, one of the aims of a familiarization voyage to discover defects as early as possible, so that they could be fixed if feasible. That was part of the reason the last stage of such a voyage was a combat simulation.

The other aim of the mock battle was to eliminate any would-be captains who were deemed incompetent. The militaries of every interstellar power apart from the **Empire** had **compucrystals** do all of the piloting, but the Abh were a race born expressly to fly ships through space, and had no desire to leave the elaborate and involved maneuvering necessary in war to the whims of machines.

When it came to assault ships, the **Captain** piloted the ship themselves, as well as wielding their main arms, the **antiproton cannons**. The lives of all the crew were in the palm of the **Captain's control gauntlet**.

It made more than a little sense, then, for whichever Captains were judged to be strikingly unskilled during the mock battle to be reshuffled elsewhere. And while for an Abh it was exceedingly humiliating to be viewed as bad at piloting, it was hardly the end of the world if one couldn't be a *Manoüass gairr* (assault ship Captain); there was plenty of work for crew **starpilots**.

Of course, many an exam was implemented to test aspirants' qualifications to be **Captain** even before the battle simulation. However, the Abh tended to be strangely oversensitive regarding ship safety.

So, for the task of judging each Captain's innate qualities, the training fleet employed evaluators, all of whom were starpilots with plenty of experience that newbie Captains could scarcely rival.

All that said, Lafier was not amused by the fact that her ship had gotten decimated in a blink.

"It's clear to me you have a strong inclination toward fighting *gracefully*, with poetry. And if fortune's on your side, you might even survive. Let's just say I wish you and your subordinates the best of luck." The **Hecto-Commander's** salute was slightly off, but then he disappeared.

Lafier stared blankly in the Hecto-Commander's wake.

"**Captain?**" said Sobash.

"I'm leaving the rest to you," said Lafier. "I... wish to rest a while."

Meanwhile, *Linn Ssynec Raucr Dreur Haider Ghintec* watched from behind as Lafier slunk out with uncharacteristically visible disappointment. *Yeesh, that must have stung.*

Curiously, despite the *Basrogrh* not having ever engaged in battle, it had amassed some notoriety. The root of the rumors lay in the two noble manors aboard ship.

The first was the captain's quarters, the *Garich Bærr Parhynr* (Viscountess of *Parhynh's* Manor), and the second, Jint's own *Garich Dreur Haider* (Count of Hyde's Manor).

For Lafier, who was a member of the **Imperial Family**, she had a large amount of space reserved for her immediate family in the **imperial capital** of *Lacmhacarh*, in the form of the **Royal Palace of Clybh**.

In the **Countdom of Hyde's** case, however, there was no manor in either the **capital** or the **territory-nation** itself. The highly cramped starpilot quarters arranged for him here on this assault ship was Jint's one and only place to dwell.

When he snapped to, he noticed all the crew on the bridge was staring right at him. Was it just his imagination, or were those eyes expecting something out of him?

There were, of course, only three pairs of eyes on him, because here "all the crew" meant three people.

Jint turned to look at **Vanguard** Sobash first. As an Abh, he didn't age outwardly, so while he still looked like he was in his twenties at most, he was actually already over fifty. As for why he was still only a vanguard starpilot at this age, it was because he'd long been taking part in commerce and trade. According to the grapevine, his wealth was considerable.

Next, Jint glanced at **Linewing** Ecryua, the young woman with the soft-looking sky-blue hair. She was only a year or two older than Jint, but his Lander brain pegged her as being not a day over her mid-teens, judging by her appearance. Yet her demeanor was so serene and mild that he could sense she was older, too.

Lastly, he looked at **Mechanics Linewing** Samson. As could be gleaned from the un-Abh name, he was not an Abh by birth. He hailed from a certain **landworld**, and nearly 40 years had passed since he'd worked his way up from **NCC** non-commissioned crew rank.

Jint returned his gaze to Sobash, and smiled weakly. "So, uh, what's the deal?"

He heard a tremendous sigh. Samson's sigh. "**Senior Starpilot**, may I take it upon myself to tell this laddie what his role is?"

"Please do," said Sobash, smiling gently. "As this ship's Next-in-Command, I could order you to, but I'd rather not force such a perilous mission on anyone."

"Roger that." Samson put an arm around Jint's shoulders. "Now then, **Quartermaster Starpilot...**"

"What is it?"

"Today's mock battle has dealt our **Captain's** self-esteem a terrible wound. I imagine you understand that much."

"Don't tell me you're feeling worried for the **Captain's** skills in battle?" Jint attempted to explain it all away for her, for her sake. "**Hecto-Commander Cotcøerh** is an absolute veteran, whereas the Captain's only just received this ship..."

"I know that, Lonh-Dreur," Samson interrupted.

"Please don't call me by that **title**," Jint objected. Before he could even get used to "*ïarlucec Dreur*," he'd suddenly risen in rank, and he had yet to shake how off-putting that was.

"Okay, I'll call you **Quartermaster Starpilot** Lynn, then. In any case, I can assure you we haven't the slightest misgiving about fighting under the **Captain's** command. On the other hand, it's not as though we think we're 100% safe under **Deca-Commander** Abliar's wing, either. Our circumstances wouldn't much change under any other Captain; all we know is that our Captain's skills aren't on the lower end of the spectrum. Or maybe, that's just what we'd like to believe. You get what I'm saying, don't you?"

"I do," nodded Jint.

"Then you'll understand why we'd like for the **Captain** to be feeling better about herself during battle, even if we can only raise her spirits so much. The better she feels, the higher percent chance we make it out of combat alive, I feel. I don't see her as the type to be succumbing to overconfidence, so I doubt it'll backfire on us."

“So you believe that if the **Captain** is under the weather, we’re all in danger?”

“‘Danger’ is a strong word,” said Samson, shaking his head no. “I’m thinking of it as our survival rates going down a tiny percent, that’s all. Still, that’s a number we’re staking our lives on. Isn’t it natural for anybody to want to raise their chances of living to see another day, even if only a little?”

“Of course.”

“That’s where you come in.”

“Where I come in?” Jint feigned surprise. “What can I do?”

“Are you really going to make me say it?”

“You’re not going to ask me to lift her spirits, are you?” Despite himself, his apprehension seeped into his tone of voice.

“It’d be fantastic if you could, yes.”

“But I don’t have that kind of confidence myself!”

“Well, we’re not expecting you to work any miracles. Just talk to her. Why don’t you listen to her mope? You know, lend an ear?”

“Listen to her ‘mope’?” Jint winced at the bizarre image of Lafier being so whiny.

“Hmm. Knowing the **Captain**, she might not be one to air idle complaints. At the end of the day, she is an Abliar,” Samson admitted. “But it’d still be a good idea to be there to talk to her. Especially when she’s feeling down.”

“But why...” *now*, he’d almost let slip, “...me?”

In reality, he was confident he was the only one onboard that could speak to her in a friendly, relaxed way. Yet he was also hesitant to make it too clear that his bond with Lafier extended beyond their superior-subordinate relationship.

“You’re going to make me explain that, too?” The corners of Samson’s mouth curled subtly.

“Tell me, young man, if you ever found the **Captain** in a foul mood, what would you do?”

“I’d try to console her somehow,” said Jint.

“And what would you do, **Senior Starpilot**?”

“I’d come up with some urgent errand,” he replied immediately. Then, after a slight pause: “An errand far, far away from her.”

“See, that’s what any rational person would do. But here you are, saying you’d try consoling her.”

“Ah... uh...”

To tell the truth, Jint just didn’t want to. When she was irritable, Lafier was not the most pleasant of conversationalists, not even to him. She’d just think of it as a failure of Jint’s to mind his own business.

“You’re just imagining things,” said Jint, no longer dancing around what he actually believed. “I mean, the **Captain** can tend to herself, and if she caught wind that her subordinates were going out of their way to be nice to her, she’d get upset.”

“Sure, but if you ask me, a wrath-crazed Abliar feels more natural than a dejected Abliar.”

“That is true,” he concurred, but in his next breath he tried to make the idea sound like a doomed prospect. “Only, when it’s you standing in the firing line of her wrath, I don’t think what does or doesn’t feel natural is really your biggest concern.”

“Good point...” Samson stopped to think.

“At any rate, if the **Captain** ever feels as though she’s been treated with kid gloves this whole time, she’ll get a little temperamental,” Jint added. “I have no idea what’d happen if she got the impression we were ‘watching over her,’ or what have you.”

“Hmm, well, you certainly know what the **Captain**’s like the best out of any of us. None of us have been on any adventures with her, or received any cats from her. And none of us are here because we were selected by her, either. Most importantly, we’d never be able to drop her titles when addressing her...”

“You knew!?” he shouted, inadvertently. He’d planned to never act overtly familiar with Lafier in front of their fellow officers.

It was Samson's turn to be startled. "You never noticed? I've overheard you call her by her given name too many times to count. And the Captain didn't seem to mind at all; it came across as natural as can be."

"I overheard you call her by her given name three times," said Ecryua.

Jint's face turned red. He thought he'd been careful, but he supposed his attentiveness must have slackened at times.

"Don't fret, **Linewing**. We won't be turning sour over the friendship you've fostered with the **Captain**. As long as you keep doing your job, we won't give any trouble out of some kind of petty jealousy."

"I mean, that's not something I was worrying would happen..."

"Then just go to the **Captain's** room already."

"All right..." Jint was almost convinced, but then: "Wait, please, hold on. I insist you're getting the wrong idea here. First of all, I don't have any ready-made pretext to initiate things. If I were to pay the captain's quarters a visit now, she'd get suspicious. The Captain told us she'd be 'resting,' remember?"

"You have all the pretext you need," said Ecryua, pointing at the ship's layout map.

A set of glyphs was flashing over the captain's quarters, as it was receiving the signal from the transmitter in the collar of Jint's pet kitty.

"Thanks a lot, Dyaho," Jint intimated bitterly.

Lafier stared absent-mindedly at the cat as it rolled around her desk. As she stroked its throat, its eyes narrowed with evident gratification.

There's nothing to be done; I lost and that's that, Lafier told herself.

If she *had* been able to defeat a practiced evaluator, that'd only spell a sorry state for the **Star Forces**.

...But it's still discouraging.

"Tell me, have you no troubles?" Lafier asked Dyaho.

Naturally, Dyaho failed to reply. Although, she'd heard once that when a cat

rubbed against the floor — or in this case, a desk — it was a sign it was feeling irritated. Poor Dyaho was probably lacking enough prey to hunt.

“Hey, can I come in, Lafier?” came Jint’s voice through the com. “I hear Dyaho’s in there, causing you grief.”

Lafier wordlessly input the command for the door to open into her **wristgear**. When she looked behind her, Jint was standing there with a stiff smile.

“Sup.” Jint lifted an awkward hand in greeting. He couldn’t have made it any clearer that he hadn’t just come to take the cat.

“It’s nothing to get worried about,” said Lafier.

“Worried?” Jint feigned surprise. “About what?” He was being so transparent that she couldn’t even get angry. “Well, if you’re not worried, then good.”

Dyaho stared up at his owner with disinterested eyes, and loosed a gaping yawn.

“Don’t welcome me so warmly, Dyaho,” Jint quipped.

The two of them remained there for a time, neither speaking. Dyaho, meanwhile, was grooming himself with enthusiasm.

“Jint...”

“Yeah?”

“What’s for dinner today?”

“That’s your question?” Jint was amazed. “You know it’s on the **compucrystal net**.”

“Yes, but you just standing there not saying anything is making me uncomfortable.”

“Ah.” Jint nodded, and looked at his **wristgear**. “Looks like we’re having *sagaich soclyzr* (herb-grilled lamb) for today’s main. Want me to read the rest of the menu to you?”

“No, that’s okay.” She didn’t actually care about dinner. She cut to the chase. “If you have something to say, why don’t you come out with it?”

“I don’t actually know what to say.” Jint pulled a spare chair. “Mind if I sit?”

“Do as you please.”

“Thanks.” Jint took a seat backwards, and rested his chin on its back. “About that battle simulation...”

“Don’t tell me what I already know good and well,” she warned him. “Don’t waste my time telling me I was bound to lose to someone like **Hecto-Commander Cotcærh**, or that I didn’t do poorly for a novice captain.”

“I won’t. I just think you shouldn’t get so down in the dumps in front of others.”

“Down in the dumps? Me?” Lafier was slightly astonished.

“That’s how everyone took it, anyway. Seems like, when the average person sees a depressed Abliar, they think it doesn’t bode well.”

“Is that true of you, too?”

“Nah. I mean, I already witnessed a **royal princess** on the verge of tears three years ago.”

“Shut up, Jint.”

“I thought you said it makes you uncomfortable if I don’t say anything.”

“True, but it’s not as though you’ve ever actually shut up after being told to,” Lafier fired back.

“Guess you’re right,” said Jint, scratching his head. “Back to the point: you do understand why everyone might be a little apprehensive, right? If you get so sulky after losing a battle you could never win in a simulation, it’s no wonder they’d worry how you’d handle losing in an actual battle.”

“It’s all right. I’d do the right thing and order everyone to abandon ship.”

“Yeah, of course, they don’t doubt that,” said Jint. “It’s just a little nagging concern, that’s all.”

“Enough about ‘them.’ How do YOU feel? Are you as ‘concerned’?”

“No way. I think I know the difference between when it is and isn’t all right for you to lose heart. Or at least, I knew the difference three years back. And I don’t believe you’ve changed.”

“Yep. So I’m all right,” she repeated. “That aside, you’ve gotten quite stuck-up the short while we didn’t see each other, haven’t you?”

“Wish you’d say I’ve gotten ‘dependable,’” Jint grinned. “Well, might as well lean into ‘stuck-up.’ ’Cause it looks to me like you’re just not used to losing. You’re like a sharp and solid short sword. If you clash with a blade that’s even more solid, you’d probably snap instead of bending. Or that’s the vibe you’re giving, anyway. If the next time you lose, you do so with more poise, then everybody will see you in a new light.”

“Idiot.”

“Well, I’ll be going, then.” Jint got up, and peered at the desktop. Dyaho was occupying himself with some solitary amusement. He scooped him into his arms, and the cat growled in protest.

“Don’t tell me you’re trying to be a father to me,” said Lafier.

“Is that how I’m coming across?”

“Yes. It’s vaguely distasteful.”

“That’s what I’d call a gross misunderstanding.” Jint beamed. “We’re in the middle of **space**. You know, the home of you Abhs-by-birth. And the only thing I, as a lowly *nahainudec* (landworlder), can do is to follow you, and trust in you.”

“Your manner of speaking rings as insincere as always.”

“No, bad Dyaho, no claws,” Jint chided. “I’m sad you feel that way, Lafier. I’m always dead serious. But anyway, see you later.”

Jint turned to leave. Lafier opened her mouth, about to say something.

“What?” Jint sensed it and looked back at her.

“No, nothing,” she said, shaking her head.

For a moment, Jint looked on with a curious look, but he exited the room without another word.

What Lafier had almost said: *I thought that three years ago, we were each other’s protectors. Looking back now, that was comical, wasn’t it?*

Chapter 3: The *Chytmec Bhobéirnair* (Vobayrneh Astrobase)

“So you’re saying you do not intend to issue a summons to surrender?” Premier Tallas of the Aptic Star System was stunned.

“Correct. We are choosing not to for the meantime,” stated *Abliarsec Néic Lamsar Dusanh*, **King of *Barcæc*, Crown Prince of the Humankind Empire of Abh**, and **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief**. “Even if you were to surrender now, it would not be of much benefit to us.”

He had arrived in the Aptic System (directly commanding the principal fleet) soon after **Associate Commodore Sporr’s *Byrec Casna* Fleet 1** had. Now, he was entertaining the star system’s premier’s transmission aboard the **flagship**, the **patrol ship *Sancaü***.

“In other words, you’ll simply be blockading our planet.”

“We’ve taken the liberty of closing off all space above the 300 *üésdagh* mark. I don’t think we shall disrupt any traffic that transpires below that line. We will, of course, respond to any hostile activities in kind, but I don’t think that will hinder your daily lives.”

But Tallas wasn’t letting up. “Aptic III is a manufacturing planet. We aren’t self-reliant with regards to our food supply. I won’t divulge the quantities of our emergency reserves, but casualties from starvation will crop up soon enough.”

“While we do not especially wish to bring famine to your society, the reality is that it is not, ultimately, our problem. Just so you’re aware, just because we won’t be demanding your surrender, does not mean we won’t accept your surrender. Our military plans on remaining in this star system for some time, so I advise you to surrender whenever you so desire.”

“The way you’re putting it, **Your Highness**,” said Tallas, brow furrowed, “it appears you have no real interest in our planet whatsoever.”

“To be completely frank, that is indeed the case,” nodded *Dusanh*. “What we

are interested in is the *portal* relatively close to your sun, and the hydrogen and water on Aptic IV.”

“That is demeaning in the extreme,” spat Tallas.

“I do hope I haven’t hurt your feelings,” said *Dusanh* in consolation.

“How else am I supposed to feel?”

“That is a shame.” It was not, in point of fact, a shame to him, but so he remarked. “If, once our current operation has completed its initial stages, your star system is still within our control, and you still have not surrendered, then we will formally demand your surrender.”

“Should I tell you that it’s a relief to hear that?” Tallas shot back sarcastically, scowling.

Dusanh pretended he didn’t sense how indecorous Tallas’s response was, satisfied that the Premier had taken the hint that they ought to surrender of their own accord. “Allow me to add that we do not wish for your planet to fall into a state of disorder. Restoring order on a **landworld** takes time and effort, to put it lightly. As such, I ask that you surrender before anarchy takes hold.”

“I’m thinking I wouldn’t mind exposing my mortal shell to the bats and cudgels of enraged insurgents if I saw it inconvenienced you all.”

Once again, *Dusanh* pretended not to hear that.

“Now then, **Your Highness**,” Tallas continued, “this was quite the fruitful conversation, if only because I now understand what you’re all thinking. We’ll consult amongst ourselves from here on out.”

“I bid you farewell, Your Excellency.” *Dusanh* stood up and saluted, and then the video of Tallas cut out.

With that, any and all consideration of the affairs of Aptic III flew from the **Crown Prince**’s mind. The man had hundreds more stars and planets to conquer. He could hardly afford to fuss over a single **landworld**.

The *Sancaü*’s **Commander’s Bridge** was located where the **mobile space-time mines** were housed. Given that they had to control an expansive fleet, the bridge necessitated a large amount of space to function. Several dozen

command personnel were busy working.

Behind *Dusanh*'s **Commander-in-Chief's Seat** proudly fluttered three flags. At the top was the **crest banner** of the **Empire**, the eight-headed *Gaftnochec*, and to its bottom-left, the crest banner of the *Lartiéc Barcær* (Royal House of Barkeh), which was exactly the same as the **imperial flag** apart from the base being the red of the *Néic Lamsar*. Finally, the flag on the bottom-right with blue flames was the **Phantom Flame** *glac byrer* (fleet flag).

Dusanh looked down upon the **map of planar space** playing out on the floor of his bridge. Aptic, Miskehrr, Mioflandia, Darmap, and Wimber — the five star systems that had been added to the **Empire's** provisional territory.

However, they had not yet engaged in full-scale battle, and had not sustained any real damage. The only battle to speak of occurred when **Fleet 1** penetrated the Aptic Star System. In the other star systems, the United Humankind's fleets fled as soon as they learned of the **Star Forces'** approach.

Dusanh didn't think the enemy craven for it. The Abh would have acted likewise. It was beyond them to post sufficient forces along the borders of their lengthy sphere of influence; posting small units as lookouts and observers was all they could manage. Though the Abh were often deemed "haughty and reckless," when they did do something rash, there was always a reason for it. Facing off against the **Star Forces**, an enemy they couldn't defeat despite escape being an option, would have lacked any justification.

"It's all so tranquil," *Dusanh* murmured.

They were likely amassing their fleets somewhere deep within their own sphere of influence. Fleets that could rival his own in scope. Whether or not *Cfazaitec Rainibr* (Operation Phantom Flame) would unfold as planned depended on their own speed. If the Abh fleets managed to strike before the enemy could assemble enough firepower, they could accomplish their battle objectives to perfection with minimal sacrifices.

Of course, the **Star Forces** had learned, through abundant battle experience, that a strategy never went exactly as planned. As a consequence, they'd given thought to what to do if the enemy counterattacked earlier than otherwise anticipated. At the moment, however, nothing indicated that was more than a

possibility.

“Why didn’t you issue a demand to surrender?” asked the **Chief of Staff, Star Forces Admiral Cénéch Üémh Stymer Cipair**.

Whenever she stood in place, she did so stiffly, as though always at attention. Only her head was facing *Dusanh*. Any expression that graced her beautiful Abh visage was a stern manifestation of that emotion. An undulating mane of light-purple hair covered her shoulders.

“Loath as I am to admit it, the state of the war is fluid,” answered *Dusanh*. “The UH might recover this star system soon. Should that happen, then the people of Aptic would feel ashamed for having become a territory of the Empire. As such, there’s no need to hurry.”

“Are you saying you didn’t demand their surrender because you were considering their feelings?”

“Correct.” *Dusanh* nodded.

“How kind of you.” But her words were steeped with incredulity.

“Our kind needs kindness.”

“Tell the truth. You just didn’t feel like doing the ceremonial signing or the incorporation procedures, right?”

Bull’s-eye.

He had conquered so many worlds for the **Empire** so far, yet adding a populated star system to the Empire as a territory remained no easy matter. Until an official **lord or lady** was appointed, the task of administering a newly integrated star system fell on the commander that accepted that star system’s surrender. And in this case, that would be *Dusanh*.

Needless to say, *Dusanh* knew many a person upon which he could foist the job, but that was work in itself. In his mind, *Byrec Ghuta* (Fleet 5) and **Star Forces Admiral Lecemh** were there to handle that kind of tedious drudgery.

“Furthermore, it seemed to me that the Premier rather wanted you to demand he surrender.” Her opinion matched his own.

“That’s **Our Highness the Commander-in-Chief**,” Kenesh continued. “You

never give people what they want, and always give them what they don't."

"It's just a bit of harmless fun," *Dusanh* explained. "It is true that the battle situation is fluid, mind you. And in the end, it will be the people below who decide. It's no big to-do whether I issue that demand or not, wouldn't you agree?"

"I'm not criticizing you," she replied. "I'm simply appreciating anew how incorrigible **Your Highness** can be."

"I see."

"Of course, I've had plenty of opportunities to re-acknowledge that particular aspect of your personality, and I'm sure there will be plenty more in the days to come."

"Surely there's little need to 'rediscover' me that many times?"

"Not for me, no." Kenesh stared at him, her eyes the color of her hair.

"You're not saying that I need to re-acknowledge it?"

The **Chief of Staff** just stood there. It appeared she felt no need to answer that question.

"I trust you see we must keep this a secret, **Chief of Staff**," said *Dusanh*, gazing around at the **command personnel** hard at work on the bridge.

"Keep what secret?"

"The fact that relations between the **Commander-in-Chief** and his **Chief of Staff** aren't untroubled. It would affect the morale of the entire military, would it not?"

"I think relations between us are going swimmingly."

There were eight star systems in the **Empire** that were called "**astrobases**." The **Vobayrneh Astrobase** was one of the eight, with a yellow dwarf star at its center. There lay a planet named *Lurcédhec* (Loorkedth), which had become an R&R destination for the **soldiers**. Its topography was varied, and the **Star Forces** offered wholesome diversions of all kinds. And it wouldn't take much effort at all to encounter some not-so-wholesome diversions offered by non-Star Forces

individuals.

However, this planet was nearly exclusively utilized by **NCCs** of landworld origin, with **starpilots** rarely touching down. The few starpilots that did also hailed from landworlds. One could even say that an Abh-from-birth had never set foot upon the lands of Lookedth.

Recreation amenities for Abhs, meanwhile, were situated in orbit around Lookedth. The *sodmronh* (microgravity-garten), in particular, was indispensable for the mental and bodily health of those born in *Lacmhacarh*. Though constructed and used primarily as facilities that helped develop the *frocragh* spatio-sensory perception in babies, swimming through the air proved a delight for adult Abhs as well.

Naturally, the facilities orbiting Lookedth weren't solely entertainment centers. What made the place an **astrobase** was the military facilities. Or rather, the military facilities that weren't the entertainment facilities, which were all owned and operated by the military as well (including the ones on-planet). In addition, the countless ships spitting out of the *Saudec Bhobéirnair* (Vobayrneh Portal) were almost all drawn by Lookedth's gravity.

Lookedth's orbital area was jam-packed, as new warships not yet belonging to a formation had to be composed into one or more fleets. A new **squadron** was being organized almost every day, and almost every week a new **sub-fleet** was born. Then they would head off to the battlefield, many never to return.

The *Basrogrh* was one among the flock of ships awaiting assignment to a squadron.

Jint fiddled with his **glass** and looked up. The great green orb known as the planet Lookedth loomed so large, it seemed like it could crash right down on them.

"Oh great blue globe of earth! Apple of mine eyes!" said Samson theatrically, raising a **glass** of beer to the planet above.

Captain Lafier and **Senior Starpilot** Sobash had gone to accept their orders of appointment to the **Vobayrneh Astrobase**. Meanwhile, the **NCCs** of their ship knew they were enjoying the last moments of their short furlough on Lookedth.

Though the three officers of the *Basrogrh* who were left — Jint, Samson, and Ecryua — were from different branches and of different ages, they all shared the rank of **Linewing Starpilot**, and they were all lounging at a park doing nothing of note. No rule mandated they be together, but all the same they were seated around the same table, sipping their beverages. Their break time before departing for the front was to end in three hours.

The park was attached to the *Bandhorh Chtymer* (Astrobase Headquarters), located at the very top of an enormous structure. Its ceiling was transparent, making the park ideal for a stroll or a day's repose.

"If you feel that way, shouldn't you have taken a trip down, too, Mr. Samson?" said Jint.

"No can do," said Samson.

"Why not?"

"**Starpilots** get the cold shoulder on that planet. All the **NCCs** are having fun as a group; having a starpilot with a red **waistsash** around would just put a damper on things. When I was an NCC, I used to lecture starpilots that didn't understand that on that world's code of partying. And I couldn't possibly break that code now that I'm a starpilot."

Jint sighed. "Guess I can't go, either, then."

"Yeah, the effect'd be even more pronounced since you're not only a **starpilot**, but you've got a **noble rank** to boot. That said, it's all down to what you've experienced in the end, so if you wanna see what it's like down there, I'm not gonna stop you."

"You don't need to worry about me," Jint assured him swiftly. "I've experienced the cold shoulder plenty enough already."

"You've got my condolences, kiddo."

"Man oh man." Jint grimaced at the memories of his days on the planet Delktu.

"Let me tell you, though, you've gotta love the nature. You can get booze on any old **interstellar ship**, but you won't be brushing with Mother Nature. Makes

me regret becoming a **starpilot**, sometimes,” Samson lamented.

“So, why did you become an Abh?” asked Jint.

“Me? An Abh? Get outta here. This whole being-Abh thing is clothes-deep. They gave me *reuceragh* (status as gentry) when I made **starpilot**, so now I’m playing an Abh. But soon enough I’ll be retired, and then I’m gonna run a farm back home. That’s my hope.”

The word “Abh” meant both the biological race, and the position in Abh society one could possess regardless of race. In other words, by working his way up to **starpilot** rank in the military, he was automatically enrolled into the official gentry registry as an Abh. Besides **gentry**, Abhs could also be **nobility** or **Imperials** (that is, members of the Imperial Family).

“Then, why did you join the **Star Forces** to begin with?” said Jint.

“It was a youthful indiscretion,” Samson shrugged. “When I was a kid, I thought I wanted to fly out into space. But when I got to see what it was like, I realized it wasn’t all that. But knowing how to deal with **interstellar ship** engines wouldn’t do me any good on a **landworld**, you feel me? So I figured I’d crawl my way to **starpilot**, since I can invest all of my pension money into buying myself a tiny farm.”

“So you’re going to retire soon?” Jint couldn’t keep the disappointment from tinging his voice; he was fond of the man. Samson had some years on him, sure, but as fellow **landworlders**, there was a nice breeziness to their interactions. Since, in Jint’s heart of hearts, he still didn’t really think of himself as a true **Abh noble** (even after ten years), Samson was, to him, a golden comrade. After all, they’d both had Abh-ness thrust upon them.

“Nope,” Samson replied, shaking his head. “If my math’s right, summing up my salary up till now and my future pension payout, I need three battles under my belt, and I’ve still got two left. I’m not so loyal as to make opportunities myself, but you could say I’ve got a strong sense of duty.” He paused, then: “Besides, the folks back home like the **Empire**, so it’s not like fighting for the Empire’s got no point.”

“Really?” While he knew there were plenty of **landworlds** that were apathetic with regard to **Empire** hegemony, he didn’t know there were worlds that

welcomed them. This piqued his interest. “How come?”

“Why, you ask?” Samson gave the matter a moment’s thought, but he had an answer in no time. “My home’s named ‘Midgrat,’ though it’s the planet *Dacfoc* in the *Dreuhynh Rinair* (Countdom of *Rinaic*) if you go by the name the Abh gave it. You know it?”

Jint shook his head. “I’m afraid not.”

“Aw, that’s a letdown. Granted, it’s not an attention-grabber of a world, but it’s got some rich tradition. Place is old enough to have learned about **planar space navigation** before even the **Empire**, actually. Although, the crowd back home like living quiet lives, so it’s not surprising if you’ve never heard of Midgrat.”

“So it was an interstellar power before the **Empire**?” Jint’s curiosity was only swelling. It had never occurred to him there could be a world that’d regard their own annexation as a blessing.

“It wasn’t an interstellar power, no. It’s only ever taken over the one star system, so you couldn’t really call it ‘interstellar,’” Samson corrected him. “That was the root of all of the system’s problems. Everyone on the system’s one peopled planet were doing just dandy, but before they knew it, they found themselves sandwiched between the **Humankind Empire of Abh** and the United Humankind. By that time, single-stellar nations were really rare. In fact, they realized, they were the only ones. But I guess until recently, your home planet was a ‘single-stellar nation’ off everybody’s maps, so there’s that.”

“Yeah,” Jint nodded. Jint’s home, (which, by a peculiar series of events, had become an imperial **star-fief**), was a star system totally isolated from the rest of humanity up until a mere decade prior.

“At any rate, Midgrat was in a bad spot. Apparently being part of a larger interstellar power was the vogue, and they were outmoded as a system. To give both of the great powers some credit, neither side let slip their designs on Midgrat at first. But that restraint vanished in the space of a night. Don’t exactly need to be an expert on human history to see that one coming, either. Now, those old fogeys at the statehouse, they were consummate realists. They decided that if they were gonna get swallowed up, they might as well take the

initiative of choosing which of the two to side with.”

“That was a bold move...”

“It was. They were a prosperous planet, without much of a stormy history to speak of; I bet they thought they ought to take a chance and do something drastic for once, you know? I mean, half of the planet’s history textbook is all about the stuff revolving around this one decision.”

“But why did they choose the **Empire**?”

Samson hesitated to answer. “Well... there’s a bit of an *unusual* aspect to our eating habits, the kind that makes outsiders do double-takes. We’re told that when we were still independent, a UH ‘activist’ came in and tried to persuade us to change our diet. Looking back, that was probably the deciding factor. The Abhs didn’t say a thing about it. Not in front of us, at least. And if they were going to leave our eating habits be, and the worst they’d do was call our beautiful planet of Midgrat ‘*Dacfoc*’ amongst themselves, then we were big enough to tolerate that shortcoming of theirs.”

“What do you eat?” asked Ecryua unexpectedly.

Samson mulled over what to say, but in the end he just shrugged. “You know what, I’m gonna keep it a secret. When I was a **Star Forces** freshie, I lost a lot of friends after divulging what they eat back home.”

“I’m not your friend,” said Ecryua.

Samson pretended to be taken aback for Jint to see. “Are all Abhs that blunt?”

“Sounds like you’d know better than me,” smiled Jint.

“I’ve only known any Abhs personally for three years.”

“Did I insult you?” Ecryua’s sky-blue eyebrows rose up.

A wave of the hand. “No, no, ‘course not.”

Not a word came out of any of the three for a while after.

The park was covered with lawn grass, dotted sparsely with trees standing perfectly upright, and populated by skittering squirrels. The carrier cage lay at Jint’s feet, and a squirrel peered into it inquisitively. As soon as it did, the carrier

rattled and shook.

“I’m not letting you out, Dyaho,” Jint addressed the carrier. “The squirrels here aren’t on the menu.”

The carrier rattled even more intensely, and the squirrel scampered off in startlement. “No means no,” Jint pronounced.

“You brought your cat?” said Ecryua.

“I couldn’t just leave him on the *Basrogrh*. He’d be all alone,” said Jint.

“I wonder whether your cat enjoyed its vacation?” asked Ecryua.

“Reckon he did. I left him at a cat lodging house with lots of mice.”

“That’s good,” she said, though her tone betrayed her indifference.

“But by the **Captain**’s orders I’ve got to send him back to *Lacmhacarh*, so this is where we part ways.”

“It’s a real shame. I’ve grown rather attached to him. Which is impressive, given he’s a cat,” said Ecryua..”

“Well, don’t go saying that in front of him. It’ll go right to his head.”

“I’ve never seen a cat that’s not already full of itself.”

“Wiser words,” said Samson.

It was then that Lafier and Sobash appeared, making their way across the lawn. Upon seeing Samson and Ecryua rise from their seats to salute them, a flustered Jint quickly followed suit.

“Our placements have been decided,” Lafier told them. “We are assigned to *Symh Acharr Casna* (Assault Unit 1) of *Saubh Acharr Ceutepaulygana* (Assault Squadron 1058). We set sail in 12 hours’ time.”

“Well that’s abrupt,” frowned Samson.

“I agree. But it seems this will form part of our training.”

The *Basrogrh* was sleeping unmanned in orbit above the planet Lookedth. The crewmembers were just now gathering together, since their recess was drawing to a close, so it would be difficult to load all of the necessary supplies

and ready the ship for takeoff in just 12 hours. Their eyes would be spinning by that time for sure.

“And then?” asked Ecryua. Even toward a superior officer, she spoke only the fewest words possible.

“It seems we’re headed to a certain star system,” answered Sobash.

Ecryua shifted her quizzical gaze over to the **Senior Starpilot**.

“We don’t know yet, either,” Sobash smiled. “It’d appear it’s for us to find out when we arrive, **Linewing** Ecryua.”

Ecryua nodded in assent.

“Two hours and 18 minutes of breaktime remain,” said Lafier, glancing at her **wristgear**. “Regardless, I’d like for you all to begin preparations immediately. Any objections?”

There were none. They had nothing to do for that couple of hours, anyway.

Sobash smiled again. “It’d appear it’s for us to find out when we arrive, Ecryua. Prepare the **smallcrafts** for the **NCCs**. We will go back before the rest.”

Ecryua saluted and turned on her heels.

“Off we go,” Lafier ordered the other two.

Jint picked up the carrier, only to be met by the young **captain’s** narrowed glare.

“What is that?”

Jint sighed, as he knew he was looking pretty dumb at the moment. “The cat you’re already familiar with, **Captain**.”

“I told you to send Dyaho back to *Lacmhacarh*.” Her words were pointed, reproving.

“I just thought, there’s still time left... I’ll fill out the transport forms right away.”

“There’s no time for that,” said Lafier. “We have no choice now. Bring him aboard. But know that you are to send him off as soon as possible.”

*Good grief... This is the conversation two **starpilots** are having? Right before an operation?* Jint lamented.

“Yes, without fail,” he promised her.

As they headed to the **Astrobase Headquarters’ spaceport**, Lafier asked him in hushed tones: “Do you know the name of our *Sarérh Symr Acharr* (Assault Unit Commander)?”

“How do you expect me to know?” Jint whispered back.

“It’s ‘**Hecto-Commander**’ *Atausryac*.”

“Atosryua?” Jint cocked his head. “Seems to be ringing a bell.”

“Wow, you’re dense,” Lafier replied, shocked. “She’s the younger sister of the **Baron of Febdash**. Though the **Hecto-Commander** is the **Baroness** now.”

Chapter 4: Their *Fitlachoth* (First Battle)

The newly formed **half-fleet**, the *Latuch*, took three months of joint training, and gradually coalesced as a combat unit.

Meanwhile, **Operation Phantom Flame** was progressing without a hitch, so much so that it struck the top brass as uncanny. Apart from the sporadic skirmish here and there, they'd encountered next to no UH resistance.

At this point, **Military Command Headquarters** and the *Glagamh Byrer Rainibr* (Phantom Flame Fleet Command Center) were having trouble deciding whether the enemy really did lack the power to push back, or they were just angling for the perfect opportunity.

To Lafier, however, the concerns of the top brass had little to do with her. While she was a **royal princess** of the **Empire**, and a candidate for future **Empress** of the Abh, at present, she was nothing more than the **captain** of a bog-standard **assault ship**. She was in no position to be fretting over the overall tactical complexion of the war.

What concerned Lafier was something else entirely: namely, the identity of her immediate superior.

She and the **Baronic House of Febdash** had some history, and that history could not be called pleasant — not after she'd killed the head of that house. It was she who had taken the life of Clowar, the previous **Baron of Febdash** and older brother to the Hecto-Commander.

Needless to say, she had a good reason to do the deed. The man had hamstrung her mission when time was of the essence, and she could think of no way to escape the virtual cage he'd placed her in apart from felling him. Yet **Hecto-Commander** Atosryua's attitude was extremely down-to-business, and she refrained from the smallest peep about their unfortunate past.

Well, there's no use dwelling on it, Lafier had decided early on. It wasn't as though she wanted to make friends with Atosryua, and she didn't feel guilty

over her brother's death. By that fact, Lafier was actually thankful Atosryua only interacted with her on an impersonal axis.

The assault half-fleet *Latuch*, having completed its training, entered the Aptic Star System. For the time being, its ships were to stay to patrol the system. Recreational facilities and mobile docks were already built and set in orbit around Aptic III, the very picture of a functioning rear base.

The system's governing body had yet to surrender, but none of the **Star Forces** personnel orbiting its planet let that give them pause. Every inhabited planet needed traders, but all the Star Forces needed were the various installations now floating in space.

Among the **NCCs**, who hailed from landworlds, there were those who quickly came to miss the smell of soil, yet if any of the **soldiers** were to go down to a freshly seized planet, it'd blow into trouble in one way or another; there was no way the **Star Forces** would permit crew to touch down, the planet's status as "conquered" notwithstanding.

The assault ship *Basrogrh* finished its patrol around the *Saudec Apticer* (Aptic Portal) area, and came alongside the *racnébh* (mobile base canteen) named *Dacruc*, where half of the crew had disembarked. Lafier and **Linewing Starpilot** Ecryua were the starpilots doing the ship-sitting. Ecryua was playing with Dyaho in a corner of the **ship's bridge**.

The cat was another problem, though not a big enough problem to make her head ache. From the day it first came aboard, Dyaho had carried himself like the real **Captain**. Was it really okay to pop his ego by sending him to *Lacmhacarh*?

Lafier smiled wryly. Here she was, thinking about whether or not to send off the cat. This was just so different from the battlefield lifestyle she'd been envisioning before.

"**Captain**, there's something you need to know," said Ecryua, suddenly standing up, her face sober and serious.

"What?"

"It's about this one," she said, hugging Dyaho.

"Do you, too, wish to keep him aboard?" Jint hadn't said as much, but she

could sense how reluctant he was to let Dyaho go. And now Ecryua was evidently enjoying the cat's company, as well. Even more vexingly, she'd have to say she agreed with the both of them.

"I've run a comparison between his chances of survival staying on the *Basrogrh* and his chances returning to *Lacmhacarh*."

"And?" Lafier's tone was a little more fed-up than she'd intended, but she had a feeling she knew where this was going.

"Allow me to provide some groundwork explanation before getting to my conclusions." Between Ecryua and Lafier, a variety of two-dimensional charts and readings appeared.

Lafier's impression of the **Deputy Starpilot** was of a fairly taciturn lady. Therefore, Lafier could only stare as the normally reticent Ecryua promptly launched into a veritable report. *I suppose this is certainly one way to kill some time*, she reasoned.

"You are **Linewing Starpilot Linn**, I believe," called a voice.

Jint stopped munching on his corn and looked behind him. There stood **Hecto-Commander** Atosryua. She had her bluish silver hair (the exact same hue as her brother's) tied behind her, and she was gazing at Jint with her eyes the color of a leopard.

They were on the central passage of the **mobile base canteen** *Dacruc*. This main street of sorts was the heart of *Dacruc*, and could itself be called by that name, for this **canteen** was shaped like a long, thin cylinder. The center of the tube was a passage visitors could move up and down, with shops lined up on each side, and separate passages above and below for employees and for goods to travel across. The place was chock full of sewage systems, warehouses, and more. The gravity was generated not by centrifugal force but by a gravity control system, so the canteen didn't need to be ring-shaped. As they spoke, *Dacruc* drifted lackadaisically in orbit around Aptic III like a taut piece of string. And around that threadlike structure, a number of **patrol ships** and **assault ships** were bunched up.

"**Hecto-Commander** Atosryua!" Jint rushed to salute her.

“I heard tell of you from my father.”

There was no way he could grasp her true intentions just going by her even tone of voice. His link to the Atosryua family was rather complex. He got along well with her father; despite their age gap, he could probably get away with calling himself a “friend” of his. But then there was Atosryua’s brother, the former **Febdash Baron**... Granted, Jint had taken no active part in it (to be fair, there was nothing he *could* do), but Jint still bore some of the responsibility for his demise.

Jint tensed up. “Ma’am, I owe your father a great deal,” he stated.

“Don’t get so stiff,” she smiled faintly. “What happened to my brother is water under the bridge.”

“Oh, uh... is... is that so...?” Jint blinked.

“Don’t get me wrong, my brother’s killing was nothing to celebrate.”

“R-Right, of course.”

“But we weren’t close as siblings. Among other things, I didn’t agree with how he treated our father. To think he would imprison his own parent...”

The **starpilots** and **NCCs** ambling on by swerved around the two of them, who were standing there, blocking the road.

“We never really got along, my brother and I...”

“But I, uh... what can I say..” Jint spluttered. “Well, I’ll just say it’s a shame about your brother.”

“Thank you. It was a shame.” Atosryua put a finger to her forehead. “The issue now is this **noble rank**.”

“Huh?”

“As you well know, Febdash is in the middle of nowhere. It’s so remote that it takes several days to arrive at the next manor over. I’ve hated the place since I was a kid. I shudder at the thought of needing to live there.”

“Ah.... Huh.”

“I was so relieved when my brother inherited the title, to be honest with you.

I thought I'd be able to live and enjoy life in *Lacmhacarh* for the rest of my days. But then your princess squashed my life plans."

"Sorr-" He apologized reflexively, but stopped midway. "Uhh... I don't mean to be rude, but the **Captain** isn't 'my princess.' In case that's whom you're referring to."

"Don't let it get to you. It's just a figure of speech."

"...Ah." Jint worked up the nerve to ask: "Are you, uhh, *sure* you don't resent us..."

Atosryua raised an eyebrow. "From what I heard from my father, I thought you'd be cleverer than that."

"I apologize," said Jint glumly.

"Even if I did resent you, there's no way I'd tell you that, is there?" she shrugged. "Besides, I could exact my revenge on you using my position as your superior. If I held a grudge, I'd just look for a chance to seize my vengeance without telling you a thing."

"I see," Jint nodded prudently. "But, you were saying about your **noble rank**..."

"Oh, that's no big deal. It all depends on how you think about it; being a head of a **noble house** has its perks, and even a shabby little **domain** like that can be turned into something cozier with a little effort. I think I might even follow in my dear brother's footsteps and hire a bevy of handsome young men as my **servant vassals**. But that'll have to wait until the war is over."

"That's... uh, great idea," said Jint. He had no idea what to say to that, so he just went with the safest answer.

"In any case, be sure to relay what I said to your little princess. Tell her I don't resent either of you. That I've resigned myself to my **rank** as a twist of fate."

"Why haven't you told her directly?"

Atosryua knitted her lustrous eyebrows. "That would be unpleasant."

"Unpleasant?"

“Yes. She’s an Abliar princess. I can talk to her as a soldier, but as an individual, how could I strike any kind of relaxed conversation with her?”

“If you say so.” Jint sighed. Life was so unfair. There were plenty of people Jint didn’t particularly want to talk to, but it seemed there was no one in the galaxy who disliked talking to Jint.

“Don’t forget to tell her,” Atosryua insisted.

“I won’t,” Jint nodded limply.

Suddenly, an alarm resounded through the whole of *Dacruc*. “What the?” Atosryua peeked at her **wristgear**.

All around, **starpilots** and **NCCs** alike looked at their left wrists in unison. The sight was almost farcical. No different himself, Jint looked at his own.

ASSAULT SUB-FLEET LATUCH, ALL SOLDIERS:: SIX UNIDENTIFIED PATROL SHIP SPACE-TIME BUBBLES FLYING TOWARD THE *SAUDEC ÜIMBURR* (Wimber Portal). LIKELY THE ENEMY’S RECONAISSANCE-IN-FORCE. CREW ON STANDBY, RETURN TO YOUR POSITIONS IMMEDIATELY.

“My, how dreadful.” Atostryua didn’t spare Jint another glance as she stomped off.

Ecryua was still in the middle of her presentation when the alarm rang.

“Tell me some other time. For now, you must...” But the diagrams changed before she got to issuing her orders.

Noted alongside the names of all the crew in the register were numbers and info such as whether they were aboard a ship. The numbers indicated how long it would take the crew that wasn’t aboard ship to embark. This was exactly what Lafier wanted to know.

“It will be approximately 12 minutes and 37 seconds before we’re all assembled,” said Ecryua emotionlessly.

“Attention. This is your **Captain**,” Lafier announced over the ship’s speakers.

“Any crew who have yet to do so are to assume their posts in 10 minutes,” she commanded. That second, the register of names switched out into a process file for the operations needed to set sail. Each item on the list was either blue or red.

“Blue means it can go ahead immediately,” Ecryua muttered.

She’s surprisingly attentive, Lafier thought of the otherwise uncommunicative **Deputy Starpilot**. Her opinion of her certainly improved.

In the midst of handing down directives where she noticed things could be done, she could feel the excitement and joy boil up bit by bit within her. This was her first battle.

Of the **starpilots** who had disembarked, Samson was the first to get back aboard, a pill gripped in his hand. As soon as he plopped into his seat, he tossed the pill into his mouth.

“Gurgh, that’s gross,” he grimaced, gabbing to no one in particular. “I hate how these sober-uppers feel.” He must have been drinking earlier; that drug took the alcohol out of his bloodstream. With Samson, the custodian of the ship’s engines, aboard, they could finally set about preparing to takeoff in earnest.

Samson gave the room three or so scans to see which subordinates were there and working. At last, Sobash silently glided in and took up his designated place. Jint was the last to arrive.

“You’re late, Jint,” said Lafier.

“My bad, err, I mean, I apologize, **Captain**.” Including the **NCCs**, the entire crew returned 92 seconds ahead of the ETA.

“All right. Shut all **switchgates**,” ordered Lafier.

The bridge suddenly turned lively.

“Detaching connecting passageways and preparing accommodation.”

“Preparations complete.”

“Rev the anterior attitude control engines at minimal propulsion.”

“Commencing propulsion... Propulsion underway.”

“Sever the connecting passages!” shouted Lafier.

The assault ship *Basrogrh* cleared off the **mobile canteen**.

“**Captain**, a transmission,” reported Ecryua.

“This is your **Commander**.” **Hecto-Commander** Atosryua’s holovision image emerged. “We have orders from above. We are to capture the unidentified space-time bubbles, and, as soon as we establish they are the enemy, annihilate them. I’m sending the coordinates of our point of assembly so that each ship gathers together as soon as possible. Any questions?”

Atosryua’s hologram cocked her head slightly, waiting for questions, but no ship asked any. “Very well.” The *Sarérh Symr* (Unit Commander)’s vermillion lips curled up. “I’m sure that for many of you, this is your first real battle. It is mine as well. The unidentified space-time bubbles are most likely the enemy conducting reconnaissance-in-force. What could the units at Wimber have been doing, I wonder? On second thought, I suppose it was wrong to expect much of mere lookout units. Putting that aside, we have to hand it to them: this is an extremely brave move,” Atosryua saluted. “Let’s give these brave men and women a proper welcome.” And with that, she vanished from their screens, still saluting.

For small vessels like assault ships, it was the **Captain**’s job to pilot one while in **3-space**. Lafier hooked her **circlet**’s **access-cables** into the ports, and switched her *frocragh* to beyond-ship mode. Information rushed from the countless sensors installed in the hull of *Basrogrh* into her brain.

She slipped her left hand into the **control gauntlet**. Attitude control shifted the ship’s orientation, and with low-temperature propulsion akin to a soft zephyr, they pushed to a safe distance from *Dacruc*. Their immediate vicinity was already full of ships that had likewise gotten their takeoff preparations in order. They had to open up a safe distance away from those ships as well. A number of ships had begun gaining speed.

Lafier re-confirmed the point of assembly using her *frocragh*. It was right by the **Aptic Portal**. She pointed the ship’s bow toward the assembly point’s future coordinates with her **control gauntlet**.

“Main engines ignition,” Lafier ordered.

They could feel the tremors resulting from the warring of matter and antimatter from their seats. She bent her left hand’s fingers such that they accelerated at max speed.

Her *frocragh* allowed her to sense the long thin *Dacruc* canteen fly backward together with Aptic III as they shot forward.

“And the race is on!” Samson strummed his fingers. The **main engines** he’d painstakingly outfitted were working beautifully.

They could feel swathes of space blow right by. It was a difficult sensation to describe. The consort ships scattered around flew all at once behind them . There were, of course, some ships among them that had already taken off beforehand. The *Basrogrh* chased after them with all its might. The ships that had lagged behind soon raced to meet them. It was times like these that made Lafier grateful from the bottom of her heart that she was born an Abh.

Battle-line ships (which could not accelerate to their smaller-ship speeds) lay ahead. If they kept this path, they’d crash right into one. With a slight tweak of a finger, Lafier corrected course.

With that, the battle-line ship slipped down from nearby.

“Captain, a transmission from the **battle-line ship** *Rymsaumh*,” reported Ecryua. “They’re saying that close shave was a violation of safety standards.”

All Lafier thought was: *Interesting... so that battle-line ship’s the Rymsaumh.*

“They’re requesting to speak to you directly, **Captain.**”

“I’m busy,” she replied. “Tell them I’m not available. Besides, it’s not like **battle-line ships** will be in on the action.”

Ecryua relayed her **captain’s** words, and peered at the message screen with some interest, before whispering: “They’re angry.”

In the meantime, they maneuvered to the **battle-line ship’s** front, adjusted their path to follow the path they ought to have taken to begin with, and then proceeded at max speed, as though to spray the bow of the *Rymsaumh* with their **propulsor flames**.

“**Senior Starpilot**,” called Lafier. “Are there any ships belonging to our **unit** in front?”

“Just one, **Captain**,” answered Sobash.

“Which is it?”

“The *almgairh* (lead assault ship), the *Gamrogrh*.”

Lead assault ships were the **flagships** of **assault units**. As such, **Unit Commander** Atosryua was aboard it.

“How far is it?”

“Approximately two *saidagh*.”

“It looks as though we need to let the **Hecto-Commander** lead the charge,” said Lafier, biting her lip slightly.

Given all assault ships had the same specs, it was obvious the ship that left first would outstrip the rest. This just meant that the *Gamrogrh* had gotten its unmooring affairs in order faster.

She was a tad mad at herself.

Eventually, they reached the zone where they were to begin decelerating. The *rilbidoc* area of her Abh brain made the trajectory calculations subconsciously for her, and this juncture was no exception. She knew when to decelerate instinctually. She temporarily ceased propulsion, turned the ship’s orientation right around, and stoked the fullest **propulsor flames** once again in the opposite direction.

From the bow, they witnessed their fellows in war do likewise, their **flames** blossoming one after the other in the cold heavens. They were like unto a waterfall cascading from *Dacruc* to the **Aptic Portal**, as each individual droplet splashed with fearsome destructive force. Taken together, the exhaust of each ship formed a hot mist suffusing the void.

Bit by bit, the assembly point approached. Not many other ships had made it to the vicinity quite yet.

“**Captain**,” said Ecryua. “We’ve received the signal to assemble.”

“Link it up to my *frocragh*,” Lafier ordered.

One of the ships gathered around the **Aptic Portal** began pulsating in her mind’s eye: the **lead assault ship** *Gamrogrh*.

“**Captain**, a communication from the *Gamrogrh*,” said Ecryua.

“Put it through.”

“So you’re in the lead, **Deca-Commander** Abliar,” said **Hecto-Commander** Atosryua with wonderment. “Stay there and stand by until the rest of the ships arrive.”

“Yes, ma’am.” Lafier saluted, and the video cut out.

Before long, all six ships in their unit had assembled in the standard ring formation, waiting for their orders from the *glagamh iadbyrer* (sub-fleet command center).

“We’ve received our briefing,” said Ecryua. “Projecting **map of planar space**.”

The **map of planar space** surfaced on the bridge’s floor. Lafier gazed down at it.

The **Aptic portal** was represented on the **map** as a sunken spiral. Its concavity indicated a relative sparsity of **space-time particles**. The blue dots circling the **portal** were patrolling allies. The area surrounding the **portal** was nearly completely level, which meant that the density of **space-time particles** was that even across this zone of **planar space**.

In a corner of that space, six dots color-coded yellow formed a line. The description text beside the yellow blips read: *Group of unidentified **space-time bubbles**. Extremely likely to be the enemy. Mass readings point to patrol ships. Their objective is probably to grasp the strength of our troops in Aptic and Wimber.*

“They’re not far at all,” stated Lafier.

Broken lines stretched from the yellow dots, displaying their projected paths. At this rate, they were going to pass right by the **Aptic Portal**.

“Let’s like we need to get down to business if we want to fulfill our objective,” said Sobash, arms crossed.

“That’s fine by me. What say we get this over with?” said Samson. “There’s a bottle of booze at the watering hole with my name on it, and let me tell you, those curves are something else... I promise I’ll drink lots more of you soon!”

“Speaking of which, who wants some beverages?” said Jint. “I mean, we’ve probably got time until we get our orders, so...”

Dyaho leapt up onto the **Captain**’s lap and curled up. A jolt of tension raced through the bridge.

“JINT!” In that moment, Lafier had forgotten her personal vow never to address the **quartermaster linewing starpilot** by his personal name in front of her subordinates. “Beverages are fine, yes, but how about you do something about your cat? I’ll have **peach juice**, by the way.”

“You want it hot, with some **lemon** floating in it, right, **Captain**?” Jint got to his feet. The cat carrier was already on hand.

“You had to go and make life difficult for yourself,” chided Ecryua, picking Dyaho up by the scruff. “Why not stick by my side? *Lacmhacarh*’s far, far away,” she continued.

“Uhh, he is *my* cat, you know,” griped Jint, picked him up off of her.

“Are you jealous?” The **Deputy Starpilot** locked eyes with Jint, and said: “I’ll have *soïc asa* (black tea). I take it cold and with lemon flavoring.”

“Roger that.” Jint pushed Dyaho into his cage. When the carrier lid closed shut, the cat cried pitifully.

“Could you clear us to drink stuff with alcohol?” requested Samson.

“That *is* a joke, right, **supervisor**?” Lafier asked in gentle tones.

“Of course it is, **Captain**. Just wanted to lighten the mood, but I guess my quips need work.” Samson flashed Jint a sorrowful mug. “Thanks, kiddo, I’m good.”

“Roger. But please don’t call me ‘kiddo.’”

“Call me when you get yourself a love triangle that doesn’t involve a cat, and I’ll stop calling you ‘kiddo.’”

“Right then, please keep calling me ‘kiddo.’”

Yet Lafier hadn’t failed to notice how he and Ecryua each glanced her way earlier. It wasn’t clear what it was all about, but it aggravated her all the same.

“Get me some *soïc ala* (green tea),” said Sobash. “We should have leaves from the *Dreuhynh İonir* (Countdom of *İonic*). Use those, and add a good amount of sugar.”

“Understood.” Jint entered their orders into the **console**.

Samson watched in envy as they sipped at their drinks, pining for the bottle waiting for him at *Dacruc*. Then, a message from the **lead assault ship**.

“I have orders from **sub-fleet command**,” said Atosryua’s image. “All ships are to enter **planar space** at the designated times. I’ll be sending you our unit’s designated time shortly. After breaking through, we are to quickly reassemble and form a column.”

A corner of Lafier’s **tactical control counter** was displaying the shared standard time for the forces garrisoned at Aptic. Underneath that number, another time could be seen — the hour and minute they would be rushing through the **portal**.

“Listen up,” said the **Hecto-Commander**, expression stern, “Our objective is the complete capture and annihilation of the unidentified **bubbles**. If we let a single **conveyance ship** fly away, we’ve lost. I hope I don’t need to tell you that losing our first battle would be miserable. Any questions?” A pause. “...All right, good. Let’s regroup in **planar space**.”

Ships seemingly belonging to units that had headed off before them were already getting sucked into the **Aptic Portal**. But the *Basrogrh*’s takeoff time had yet to come. Of course, Lafier would’ve minded it more if they weren’t going to be heading through at max acceleration. She wanted nothing more than to plunge into the **portal** at full speed, before the battle. Other **Captains** drifting in the nearby area were evidently of much the same sentiment, but soon enough, the time was at hand.

“And we’re off!” said Lafier, the thrill of the moment buoying her spirits.

The hand within the **control gauntlet** clenched into the shape that gave rise

to full acceleration.

The *Basrogrh*'s **main engines** roared to life while the glorious **propulsor flames** of the consort ships spouted in tandem.

"**Supervisor**, prepare the **space-time bubble** generators."

"Right away."

The **Aptic Portal**, the phosphorescent sphere before them, loomed steadily larger within her *frocragh*.

"Generate the **space-time bubble!**" she commanded.

"**Generator engines** all clear and ready to go," reported Samson, his tone now serious and totally different from before. "Confirming **bubble** generation."

"Crossing **portal** in E-minus sixty seconds," said Sobash.

"Initiate countdown starting at E-minus thirty," said Lafier, following standard protocol.

So the countdown commenced.

"...Five, four, three, two, one, passing through," said Sobash.

"Promptly pinpoint the location of the **lead assault ship**."

Where on the **planar space** side of a **portal** a bubble would end up was strictly up to chance. Appearing on the side opposite Atosryua's ship was more than possible.

Luckily, the *Gamrogrh* happened to have manifested relatively close to their position. They were about a third of the **portal**'s circumference apart.

The **space-time bubble** of the *Gamrogrh* cycled repeatedly through the **stationary** and **mobile-states** in order to lose speed and make it easier for the assault ships under its command to gather once again.

"Keep pace," directed Lafier.

It was the **Senior Starpilot**, Sobash, whose job it was to maneuver the **space-time bubble** now, not hers.

"Yes, ma'am." Sobash changed the **bubble**'s direction of locomotion, and

then switched it to the **complete mobile-state**.

Meanwhile, the **planar space map** reflected how the consort ships were everywhere headed to positions behind their own **lead assault ships**.

Lafier's line of sight darted to and fro. *Where's the enemy?*

While the enemy **space-time bubbles** were technically "unidentified," there was little else they could reasonably be. They were still far-flung, and attempting, at present, to disperse. They aimed to return with the information they accrued, even if only a single ship of theirs made it back alive. Fragmentary though the information was, (amounting almost solely to the number of Abh ships racing to intercept them and the time it took those ships to prepare), the enemy's analyst systems could press in on a full picture of the invading **Star Forces**, much akin to a geologist's ability to accurately infer a planet's environment through a single piece of rock.

*Their bravery is certainly praiseworthy, Lafier mused, but on the **Star Forces'** honor, we mustn't let a single ship escape.*

That being said, as a mere *Manoüass Gairr* (Assault Ship Captain), there wasn't much she could do. She was to follow the **lead assault ship**, and hope the chances to fire the **antiproton cannons** came soon and often. That was all.

At last, the six vessels of **Assault Unit 1** had convened. Soon after reshuffling the battle array, the *Gamrogrh* switched to its **total mobile-state**. Needless to say, the *Basrogrh* followed suit. It was third in the line.

Thus, **Assault Unit 1** joined the larger formation it was part of, **Assault Squadron 1058**. They were drawing nearer to the enemy.

The enemy reversed course, gaining distance from the **Aptic Portal**. This spurred **Assault Squadron 1058** to spread its wings — the goal, to curb the enemy's range.

Eight smaller-mass **bubbles** split off from the unidentified **space-time bubbles**.

"An **inter-bubble communication** from the *Gamrogrh*," reported Ecryua.
"*Perform **space-time fusion**.*"

Lafier gave Sobash a slight nod. They instantly intuited the Unit Commander's plan. The enemy's smaller **bubbles** were most likely a salvo of **mobile space-time mines**, (or simply **mines** for short). Assault ships were extremely weak to these **mines**, which sailed across **planar space** without outside direction using their own individual **space-time bubble** generators. As such, they ought at least to bolster their defense by converging together.

The six ships of **Assault Unit 1** fused their respective **bubbles** into one larger aggregate bubble.

Hecto-Commander Atosryua's image returned, now that **EM communication** was again feasible. "I don't think the situation needs explaining. Let's just avoid the immediate peril for the time being. All ships, conduct your **information links**."

The *Gamrogrh*'s directives were overlaid upon Lafier's *frocragh*. She equipped her **control gauntlet** anew, and directed the *Basrogrh* to the designated point, before glancing at the **planar space map**. The **bubbles** that were all too likely **mines** were hurtling straight for them. It seemed that her first opponent in her first battle would be a cadre of soulless death machines.

"Prepare the **antiproton cannons**."

"Releasing safety," said Sobash. "Preparations complete."

"And the multi-turret laser cannons?" she asked Ecryua.

The **deputy starpilot** had already finished readying the mobile cannons for operation, her expression meek and mild.

"Twenty seconds until estimated **space-time fusion**," said Sobash, who thereafter began the countdown.

Through her *frocragh*, Lafier could sense the **space-time bubble**'s inner surface was beginning to seethe and froth.

The **space-time particles** the **mine** was emitting were now penetrating their bubble with enthusiasm.

It wasn't long before their two pocket universes would merge.

"...Five, four, three, two, one, **fusion**," said Sobash.

A hole opened before their eyes, yawning wider and wider each passing moment... and they could feel what lay beyond.

“Confirmed to be United Humankind **mobile space-time mine**,” said Sobash. No sooner did he say it, than the yellow blips on the **planar space map** turned red. They were the enemy all right.

Lafier screwed her eyes shut and focused her *frocragh*. She put her right index finger on the **antiproton cannon** trigger, and lightly flexed the fingers of her left hand to point the *Basrogrh*’s bow toward the **mine**.

Atrosryua’s command resounded: “All ships, FIRE!”

The assault ship’s mass made the recoil of the **antiproton cannons** quite minimal. They felt virtually no impact whatsoever, not even at the moment of firing. Six streaks of antiproton currents shot toward the **mine**, which writhed in their whorl and, subsequently, scattered in pieces. The **mine** may have met an anticlimactically swift end, but that only marked the beginning of the battle proper.

“Our first task is complete. Undo **space-time fusion**,” said Atorsryua.

While the **Star Forces**’ assault corps were preoccupied with **mines**, the enemy patrol ships had taken the opportunity to slip through the encirclement meant to trap them, and gained a considerable amount of distance to boot. Mass differences were part of the reason why. Fragments of wrecked **mines** were hiding in the **bubbles** of each assault ship. The velocity of a **space-time bubble** was determined by, and only by, its mass, which here meant the weight of the **planar space** ships plus whatever other matter was in the **bubbles**.

Assault Unit 1 formed a column once again and gave chase, though relatively more slowly. However, though the matter that made up what used to be a **mine** was slowing them down, they were still faster than a patrol ship. Lafier checked the **map** and saw four assault units were pursuing the enemy ships, with **Assault Unit 1** at the head of the pack.

“It’s just like back then,” murmured Jint; he stood close by, with nothing keeping him busy. “Only now the positions are reversed.”

“Yeah,” Lafier nodded.

Once, they had stayed aboard the patrol ship *Gothelauth*. The ship had been by itself when it was ganged up on by enemy assault ships and destroyed. And now, these enemy ships that were probably patrol ships were facing a struggle even more desperate than the *Gothelauth*'s.

"But that doesn't mean we're clear from danger. We'll be among the first to fly into the fray. It would be strange if we didn't sustain any damage. We might even get completely wiped out."

"That is so like you," Jint smiled weakly. "To tell you the truth... I've been scared to hell and back this whole time."

Lafier scanned the vicinity to make sure nobody was eavesdropping. "To tell you the truth, so am I."

Now that one skirmish was behind her, the thrill of the moment had given way to icy terror. Something else was bothering her, too. Did **Hecto-Commander** Atosryua intend to have them plunge right into the fray, just like that? Challenging a patrol ship with only six assault ships was well past "brave" — it was reckless.

Have we been saddled with an incompetent commander?

Not that there was a thing she could do about it, apart from offering her opinion via **inter-bubble communication**.

This is quite the drag, thought Lafier, biting her lip. I can't raise a peep in protest, no matter how absurd the orders may be.

"I'm happy to hear that," Jint beamed.

"How does my being afraid put you at ease?"

"Beats me," Jint shrugged. "I guess I just feel like it'd be kinda unfair if I was the only one shaking in my boots."

"I don't think there's a single person on this ship who isn't afraid." Her eyes turned to Dyaho's cage. "With one exception."

"Dyaho's courage is unparalleled when he's not being forced to take a bath," Jint agreed.

The only **starpilot** on the *Basrogrh* with real combat experience was

Mechanics Linewing Starpilot Samson. He had participated in the *Raïchacarh Üécr Sauder Scaraicr* (Clash at the *Scaraich* Portal-Sea) three years prior. Yet even he was clearly on edge, his typical cheery manner gone as his gaze was fixed on his **console**.

“Twelve minutes until estimated **space-time fusion**.” Sobash always seemed calm.

What was on Ecryua’s mind, meanwhile, was just as inscrutable as ever.

It wasn’t hard to take the tension that gripped the bridge as none too debilitating, none too lax. Lafier could feel her spirits rising again. However, it wasn’t as though her fear had up and vanished. She noticed her lips were trembling slightly. She closed her mouth tight, and the trembling ceased.

The *Gamrogrh*, flying at the front, decelerated. She must have been thinking what Lafier was thinking: that it would be wiser to wait for the other **units** to catch up. That, or she’d received a directive from *Glagamh Saubr* (Squadron Command).

“Changing estimated **space-time fusion** time,” said Sobash at once.

“Good grief,” said Jint, relieved. “The way things looked, I thought we’d be heading in with just six ships!”

Symh Acharr Gona (Assault Unit 4) had caught up. With twelve ships in total, the *Gamrogrh* once again switched to the **total mobile-state**. They formed two columns of six ships each and sailed after the patrol ships’ bubbles in hot pursuit.

“Ten minutes until estimated **space-time fusion**.”

In other words, they had nothing to do for another 10 minutes. Lafier got to her feet in front of the **control counter**, crossed her arms, and glared at the **planar space map**.

Elsewhere, the battle was already raging. Assault ship **bubbles** were swarming around enemy bubbles. Bubbles of augmented mass were splitting back into smaller bubbles.

Recalling a video record of a certain landworld that she’d seen as a child,

Lafier knitted her brow. This was just like how those agile carnivores reared to tear apart their prey... and this sector had turned into the Abhs' hunting grounds. Lafier's *Basrogrh* was another hound in the hunting party, and it chased down a patrol ship.

"The enemy is splitting their **space-time bubble**," Sobash reported.

Four lightweight **bubbles** were now headed straight at them.

Lafier clicked her tongue. *So they still have some **mines** left.*

For what could they be, apart from **mines**? They'd probably deployed them as their last and final shred of hope.

"What's Unit Command saying?" she asked Ecryua.

"Nothing ye— an **inter-bubble communication** from the Command Center: '*All ships act at will.*'"

"I see," Lafier nodded. They no longer had the time to fuse together and wait on the lookout. Assault ships were weak to **mines**. Whether or not one survived an encounter with a mine was up to chance. Lafier strained her *frocragh* and tried to prepare for **space-time fusion**, but the figure of a familiar someone loitering nearby distracted her.

"Jint, return to your station."

As the ship's **clerk**, Jint's duties during battle consisted of maintaining the onboard environmental conditions. Whenever a ship took damage, there would be compartments that began leaking air. It was his job to evacuate the crew in those compartments and then seal them off before the pressure dropped too low in the other rooms. Put in different terms, up until they took damage, Jint was the least busy out of all of the battle positions on this ship.

He shrugged at her. "If we take a direct hit from a **mine**, will there even be any work for a **clerk**?"

True, thought Lafier. If they took a direct hit, not a man or woman onboard would ever work another day. Not after the *Basrogrh* was atomized without a trace. "Do as you please. Only, make sure to stand in place. If you were to fall on top of me, it would hinder the piloting of the ship."

“I’ll be careful.” Jint stood behind and to the side of Lafier, much like a **vice captain** might.

“Enemy space-time bubbles, likely **mines**, approaching,” said Sobash.

The red dots were closing in on the series of blue dots representing Assault Unit 1. They passed to the side of the *Gamrogrh* still at the front, passed through the second in line, and lined up with the *Basrogrh*.

Lafier could sense Jint gulping. Yet that trepidation lasted a mere moment, as the enemy **mines** flew further past.

Just as it looked as though they’d keep flying after passing by every one of the blue dots, they took a sharp turn around and came for the assault ship all the way in back.

“Fusing with the *Cidrogrh*.” That was that assault ship’s name.

Lafier simply watched as the red and blue dot became one. They intertwined into a purple dot, signifying that an ally and the enemy were engaged in battle in that spot. Soon, however, purple reverted to blue. The assault ship had survived, albeit narrowly.

“The *Cidrogrh* is dropping out,” said Sobash.

Due to taking in the mass of a **mine**, the *Cidrogrh*’s **bubble** had turned heavy, too heavy to keep up with the other ships even at **total mobile-state**. But **Hecto-Commander** Atosryua clearly had no plans to let up their **total mobile-state** velocity, hot on the enemy’s heels.

One of the remaining **mines** forced itself upon the fifth ship of Assault Unit 4. That ship was not as lucky as the *Cidrogrh*. The purple dot disappeared dizzyingly quickly.

And if things played out poorly, the *Basrogrh* would share their fate.

Naturally, Assault Unit 4 didn’t slow down, either. The two units maintained their double-column formation and chased their prey. Other groups of assault ships were also catching up.

“Seven minutes until **space-time fusion**,” amended Sobash. They were definitely drawing closer.

“So it’s ten against one...” muttered Jint. “Not bad.”

“This is even more similar to the *Gothelauth* now,” said Lafier under her breath.

“Then we’ve got to win this.”

“You really do lack any common sense,” said Lafier, taken aback. “As though I’d ever accept a battle it’s okay to lose.”

Jint shrugged. “Good point.”

“Six minutes until **space-time fusion**.” Sobash’s calm voice permeated the bridge.

“You’d best return to your battle station,” said Lafier. “Against a patrol ship, you’ll have a role to play.”

“Right you are.” Jint went back to the **clerk’s** Seat.

Lafier realized her fear had dissipated at some point.

Is that why he came by my side just now? she thought, glancing at Jint. But she soon dashed that idea from her mind. *I can’t believe he’d ever be that thoughtful.*

That said, it was indisputably the case that her terror had ebbed just by exchanging a sentence or two with Jint. Lafier focused her jitters back on the battle to come.

The gap between them and the red dots gradually shrank.

“We will be fusing with the enemy in one minute.” Sobash’s tone of voice hadn’t changed. “The **lead assault ship** will be **fusing** in 32 seconds.”

“Ecryua, when we fuse, conduct an **information link** with the *Gamrogrh*,” ordered Lafier.

“Roger,” answered the **deputy starpilot** tersely.

The *Gamrogrh* and the **lead assault ship** of Assault Unit 4 nestled close to the red dot. Then, the two lead ships finally commenced fusion with the enemy bubble.

“Seventeen seconds until **space-time fusion**,” the **senior starpilot** counted

down. "...Ten, nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three, two, one, fusion."

Lafier's *frocragh* was hit with the patrol ship's massive form. She also perceived the several assault ships that had fused with the enemy's space-time before her, flying this way and that... as well as a group of fragments of what looked like the ruins of an assault ship.

Was that the Gamrogrh? Lafier feared. But soon she learned that was not the case. The **information link** with the lead ship had gone through.

"Welcome to the red-hot field of battle, **Deca-Commander** Abliar," said Atosryua. "Proceed to the predetermined position."

The patrol ship's mobile laser cannons fired their way. Getting hit by a laser wasn't too damaging a blow, but better to take no damage at all. After affirming their position using her spatio-sensory perception, Lafier had the ship skid sideways, pointing the ship's bow right at the patrol ship. She pulled the **antiproton cannon** trigger.

The antimatter, intent on reverting the matter that made up this universe to pure energy, advanced on the enemy ship as a violent, crashing torrent. Most of the antiprotons were deflected by the enemy's **magnetic shielding**, but a small percentage made it to its hull, thereby engendering small-scale explosions.

They arrived at the point that the *Gamrogrh* directed them to, sending torrent after torrent of antiprotons without restraint.

The enemy fired its **EM cannons**. A ship belonging to Assault Unit 4 turned into plasma, the twenty lives onboard gone in the blink of an eye.

"Urgh!" Lafier's eyebrows creased. The patrol ship's **laser** pierced the *Basrogrh*. The assault ship was small, but even so, the blow didn't amount to much.

"What got damaged!?" Lafier knew that she needn't have opened her mouth for that info to reach her ears, but she couldn't keep herself from asking. This was the first dent on her first ship.

"There's a hole in Storeroom 14," said Jint.

"That's fine, then. Storeroom 14's unmanned. It's not pressurized to begin

with.”

“It’s ‘fine,’ you say!?” said Samson. “That’s where we’ve got a fair few important replacement parts stored. Let’s hope they’re not trashed...”

“C’mon, we can get them resupplied in no time,” Jint said placatingly.

“We’ll be throwing out components that’ve never been used. Do you know how upsetting that is?”

Is he distracting himself from his fear by griping about things of no consequence? Lafier conjectured.

Suddenly, the patrol ship revved its attitude control engines to the maximum extent, and the clash shifted dramatically. The enemy’s bow was now zooming for their ship.

The *Basrogrh*’s **EM cannons** were pointed at it.

“I clear the *Basrogrh* to withdraw for now!” came Atosryua’s fretful voice.

“**Split** from their space-time!” Lafier shouted. “Hurry!”

“Roger.”

Even as Sobash looked to commence space-time severance, Lafier kept pulling the trigger without a second’s pause.

Four **nuclear fusion shells** were launched at the starpilots. One shell was impeded by an antiproton current and detonated prematurely. The other three, however, continued tearing straight toward them.

Ecryua intercepted with the mobile laser cannons, but they had no effect. Lafier had had her eyes closed the entire time in order to focus her *frocragh*, but now her eyes reeled open. *Is this the end?*

But they managed to scrape away from the patrol ship’s space-time by the skin of their teeth. Sweat drenched Lafier’s tan skin. Before she knew it, she was brushing the bluish-black bangs stuck to her forehead.

“That was close, wasn’t it?” said Sobash relaxedly.

“Yes,” Lafier nodded.

She looked at the **planar space map**; sure enough, the assault units previously

behind them were now **fusing** with the enemy's space-time one after the other.

I wonder whether we'll get any other chances. Lafier was simultaneously relieved and disappointed.

"We're fusing again," she ordered, regardless. The *Basrogrh* had been advised to withdraw "for now." They weren't *retreating*.

"Roger that." Sobash's fingers danced on his **console**.

Samson's expression screamed *here we go again*. His inner thoughts were virtually audible: *Shouldn't we just leave it to them?*

Yet the *Basrogrh* returned to the grounds of battle.

The one shared **space-time bubble** was being churned by dozens of different ships' **space-time bubble generators**. And at the center of this microcosm spluttered the enemy patrol ship, in its final throes. Its **magnetic shield** was down, and it couldn't even shift attitude without difficulty. Despite all that, the **EM cannons** on its bow and stern were roaring unceasingly.

"It's like we're torturing it to death," commented Jint to himself as he watched the scene outside through the video footage. "Can't say I'm a huge fan of fighting like this."

"You shouldn't be so particular," chided Ecryua.

"**Assault ships** are too weak," Lafier remarked. "This is the only way we CAN fight against giant ships."

"I know, **Captain**, I know." Jint turned off the live feed and engrossed himself in surveilling the ship's internals.

Lafier sensed this showdown was nearing its end, and she let up on the trigger.

I might as well make this next shot count. Aiming to deal the patrol ship the finishing blow, Lafier took them closer.

"I know you came back to help, *Basrogrh*" Atostryua's voice broke in, "but all ships, fall back. I repeat, *all* ships. Evacuate this time-space posthaste."

"But why!?" blurted Lafier. "We'll be making it blow in next to no time."

“I understand, but these are orders from **Squadron Command**. The battle-line warship squadron is in position, and they are to finish it off using **mines**,” the **Hecto-Commander** informed them, speaking rapidly.

*Then there’s nothing for it. “**Space-time severance**,”* ordered Lafier.

After all, Squadron Command’s decision was probably wise. No matter how close to the brink of complete destruction they had the enemy, they’d still need to sacrifice one or two allied ships before the patrol ship fell.

Given that fact, it made sense to secure the patrol ship’s demise through **mobile space-time mines**, which would keep starpilot lives out of the line of fire.

So the assault units only served to stop the enemy in its tracks, I take it. Lafier didn’t like the idea, but that was just the way things were.

Upon splitting off back into their own **space-time bubble**, she took another look at the **planar space map**. An innumerable swarm of lightweight space-time bubbles were splitting from the battle-line warship squadron, and racing toward the enemy bubble in neat lines.

“Talk about overkill,” moped Samson.

They watched as the swarm of mines merged with the enemy ship’s bubble, and the bubble burst before their eyes. They couldn’t help but feel as though everything they did up until that moment had gone to waste.

In any case, she’d emerged from her first battle unscathed.

“Anybody want something to drink?” asked Jint.

Chapter 5: *Gycec Loborhotr* (Dinner of Condolences)

Byrec Bina (Fleet 3), which formed the core of the **Phantom Flame Fleet**, was displaying its majestic formation to the Demehter Star System. Meanwhile, *Dusanh*, **King of Barkeh**, **Imperial Crown Prince**, and **Imperial Fleet Commander-in-Chief**, was currently enjoying a fun floating sensation; the flagship of the Phantom Fleet, the *Sancaü*, contained a **microgravity-garten** specifically for the Commander-in-Chief. In the case of this particular microgravity-garten, it wasn't much of a "garden," as it couldn't comfortably house ten people, but he was the only one with a personalized microgravity room in the limited space the ship's interior provided. It was one of the small perks afforded the heir to an enormous interstellar empire.

Incidentally, this floaty feeling, unshackled by gravity, was an irreplaceable pastime among the Abh. *Dusanh* was not, however, solely partaking in a brief recess, for he had before him a **planar space map**. The **Aptic Portal** wasn't the only one to come across enemy ships. In fact, the star systems that had seen incursions from the enemy conducting reconnaissance-in-force numbered five so far. They hadn't been able to crush all of the ships; around half of the total they'd engaged with slipped away. He could only assume they'd brought a wealth of information back with them.

However, their reconnaissance-in-force was a double-edged sword. There was no denying the enemy had lain grasp to some important intelligence, but the Empire, too, had been able to make very accurate estimations of the might of the enemy's present forces by extrapolating from the numbers of ships spotted. Or so claimed the **Communications Staff Officer**.

According to the calculations, the enemy was in possession of at least 180 **sub-fleets**. As for the upper bound of the estimations, it was deemed possible that the enemy was investing 200 sub-fleets' worth of ships.

We might have made quite the slip up, thought *Dusanh*, smiling a wry little smile.

The ships that had been either training or standing watch by the border of their sphere of influence were extracted from the totality of the army's troops. And going by that sample, **Headquarters** had figured the number of ships the UH and the **Empire** were sending for both attack and defense to be roughly equal. Moreover, while attack corps could be concentrated anywhere, defense corps didn't have it so lucky. They had to form after taking an enemy attack, and then counterattack with all the force they could muster. Even if they were to, for argument's sake, form a defense corps beforehand, it would still take significant amounts of time.

Of course, if they were to intercept attacks sporadically, they could act more quickly, but that would just expose them to getting defeated one by one. And that meant that striking first was the best defense. Even if this tack ultimately resulted in, say, launching an ambush only after the enemy completed their preparations, or committing the error of deploying ships a little at a time, they would have nevertheless seized the initiative.

That was the rationale behind steaming full force ahead. And yet...

Did they read us like a book? Or perhaps, they were just banking on us using that strategy.

The speed with which the enemy rose up could only mean they had predicted where the **Star Forces** would be attacking. And then, they had positioned maneuverable vessels in advance to lie in ambush. It was either that, or the unthinkable: the Three Nations Alliance had in fact amassed far more power than **Headquarters** had surmised.

No matter the case, there's but one thing I can do. With an Abh's carriage and poise, *Dusanh* drifted feet-first toward the ground. Slowly approaching the floor, he restored the artificial gravity the moment his feet made contact, his military-issue boots clanking softly. Both his dark blue locks and the purple-colored **long robe** reserved for the **Imperial Admiral** swished as he headed for the **Commander's Bridge**, where the **command personnel** saluted him in greeting.

"Your decision, sir?" asked the **Chief of Staff, Star Forces Admiral** Kenesh.

"The enemy is not to be taken lightly," he replied, not answering the query

straight away. “They’ve chosen the worst possible time.”

“They sure have,” nodded Kenesh.

Dusanh was forced to choose between advancing as planned, and temporarily suspending their aggressive forward march in favor of focusing all their might on annihilating the enemy in the area. Had the enemy chosen any other time, he wouldn’t have this dilemma at his lap.

If the alliance had counterattacked sooner, then it would be a matter of course to make wiping out those ships their objective, for cutting enemy ships in the **Aptic Portal** zone from their base nations would render them sitting ducks. On the other hand, if the alliance had instead staged it sometime in the future, then the Star Forces would’ve prioritized pushing through, since, once the corridor between the ***Siurgzedéc*** and ***Rasisec Monarchies*** was completed, they wouldn’t be left stranded in the event that their main supply line was severed. It could even, depending on how the war progressed, lead to a chance to storm the enemy fleets with a pincer attack. But at this point in time, it wasn’t all that clear which course of action they should prioritize. **Phantom Flame Fleet 1**, led by **Commodore** Sporr, would reach imperial territory after passing through three inhabited star systems. If they were called back, and fortune was their foe, they might not make it to the battle in time.

Dusanh took his seat, the **Commander-in-Chief’s Seat**. “We will destroy their ships. That is the reason we came here.”

“Then shall we switch to Phantom Flame Strategy 18?” asked Kenesh. Their ships were currently operating under Phantom Flame Strategy 1, which assumed the enemy would never once punch back.

“Strategy 18 has the **Aptic Portal** as the main field of battle, correct?”

“That is correct.”

A **planar space map** floated up for *Dusanh* to examine. On it were displayed each **sub-fleet**’s positions and scheduled paths of motion. “Very good. I have nothing to add. Kindly issue commands in accordance with this strategy.”

“There’s something else you must decide,” said Kenesh. “Who will be commanding the defense of Miskehrr and Aptic?”

Below *Dusanh* stood twelve *Roiglaharérh* (Vice Commanders-in-Chief), each accompanied by **command personnel** of **Chief of Staff** rank or below, and each the head of a *saubh glar* (command squadron) composed of vessels such as **patrol ships** and **carrycrafts**. In case *Dusanh's* **command center** got rocked by some unforeseen shift, the Vice Commanders-in-Chief comprised a line of succession, taking up the command role in the order of their ranks. More importantly, they had a duty to command any and all fleets that were formed ad interim; those fleets were perfectly capable of functioning as command centers, too, as all it took was a few sub-fleets and/or independent squadrons.

The question now was who among these **Vice Commanders-in-Chief** would be assigned to Miskehrr and Aptic. In addition, they had to organize the ship corps already there.

"I'm aware," said *Dusanh*, who nodded lightly for her to see. "Miskehrr will go to **Commodore Mrusfac**, and Aptic to **Commodore Biboth**."

"**Commodore Mrusfac**, I understand," said Kenesh, making no effort to conceal her scowl, "but the brothers *Biboth*?"

"Oh, do you dislike them?"

"This isn't about some personal qualm," she retorted, squaring her shoulders. "I am questioning their competence."

"It is because I think they are competent that I made *Biboth* **Vice Commander-in-Chief**. It'll be fine."

"Well, if it's NOT fine, then the war front will be ripped from our forces' grasp."

"What exactly are you so worried about?" he replied, looking at her with his eyes upturned.

"**Commodore Biboth** has no actual battle experience."

"And this is the perfect opportunity to acquire some. He must eventually anyway."

"This is not a drill," she shot back, all the more chagrined. "We need as many competent and experienced commanders as possible."

Dusanh could only chuckle, saying: “I do hope you can place some faith in me. We Abliars like to think we have steered the **Empire** well over the years, and I am the heir elected by my clan members.”

“That is true,” Kenesh conceded. “And it’s a thing of wonder how easy it is to forget that fact when working by your side, **Your Highness**.”

The *Biboths* were one of the 29 Founding Clans of the Abh. A *Biboth* clan ancestor contributed greatly to the establishment of **planar space technology**, with many other outstanding scientists and engineers in their line as well. And at the same time, they were a clan whose history was tinged by a florid madness that even the Abliars doffed their proverbial caps to.

Commodore Biboth Aronn Nérémr ĩarlucec Nélaith belonged to a branch of the *Biboth* clan, but that had not freed him from their flamboyant derangement, or so those around him saw it.

That was nothing but prejudice, he assured himself. He was the only one who saw things the clearest. Maybe even too clear. His common sense, too robust.

While loitering at the break room with nothing to do, he spotted the **Chief of Staff** coming his way. He had violet ringlets, silvery eyes, milky white skin, and places of shadowed texture on his face. The spitting image of **Kilo-Commander Biboth Aronn Nérémr ĩarlucec Néféc**. And as their names would certainly clue one in on, this was no coincidence. They were born with the very same genetic makeup.

As the Abh exerted control over every step of procreation, monozygotic twins were a rare occurrence. After all, few parents believed raising two or more children with the same genes to be a good idea. The biggest reason Nefeh and Neleth’s mother decided to go with monozygotic twins, then, was probably *because* it was rare.

Despite how they were almost exactly the same age — indeed, their times of birth were nary a moment apart — Neleth was of higher rank. And that was due to Nefeh’s penchant for love affairs. Though to hear Neleth tell of it, Nefeh wasn’t so much a man of many affairs, as he was a man of the one crush winding endlessly.

“Neleth,” Nefeh grinned enigmatically. “Orders from above!”

“Honorable orders?”

“Likely so,” said Nefeh, taking a nearby seat and planting his elbows on the table before joining his hands at the fingers and leaning his dainty chin. “You are hereby commanded to head up the defense of Aptic.”

“That is an important mission.” The rumors of the main battlefield being either Aptic or Miskehrr had already made their way to his ears.

“It’ll be all right. I know you can do it. ’Cause if you’re on the verge of going batty, I’ll be there to bring you back.”

“You have that backwards,” said Neleth, annoyed. “Please don’t embarrass me with your less-than-sane counsel.”

“You think yourself a man of common sense, don’t you, Neleth?”

“You think otherwise, Nefeh?”

“Your lack of self-awareness is your greatest fault.”

“No, it’s yours.” It baffled Neleth so, that in spite of how blindingly obvious it was that he alone among the *Biboths* was graced with sharp wits, that every individual *Biboth* thought themselves to be the bearer of common sense!

“How long will it take before you finally come to realize?” Nefeh pouted. “Who in their right mind would do that kind of thing?”

“‘That kind of thing’?”

At that, Nefeh turned pensive.

“Come now,” said Neleth, “don’t go spouting off about ‘that kind of thing’ when you clearly haven’t decided what ‘that kind of thing’ even is yet.”

“That’s not it. I’m trying to decide which ‘thing’ would be the most effective to bring up.” Then Nefeh raised his head slowly. “Oh, I know just the one.”

Neleth averted his face in a huff. “There’s no need to work your brain digging up old memories, Nefeh.”

“I’m not ‘working my brain,’ Neleth. In fact, it’s impossible to forget.”

“All right, for my own reference, I’ll bite. What is it you’ve recalled, Nefeh?” Neleth frequently addressed his brother by name, for if he didn’t, he feared he would be assailed by a jarring lack of confidence as to whether he himself was Neleth or Nefeh. And in all likelihood, Nefeh addressed him by name for the same reason.

Albeit, in Nefeh’s case, the sensation of “being” Neleth would no doubt feel like an upgrade.

“Remember how, during the tactical exercise strategy meeting, you waxed on and on about how, quote, ‘affection is indispensable in war’? Do you remember the faces the attendees made?”

“I said nothing wrong, Nefeh. I have no patience for the idea that winning is everything in war. Even battle needs a little *heart*.”

“And that is a harebrained opinion. War is a duel, and the arena demands victory.”

“And I’m saying that our victory needs an artist’s touch. Do you disagree, Nefeh?”

The pair glared at each other.

At last, Neleth broke the silence: “Never mind, just go and prepare for the march. I can’t be stuck here with you and your incoherent prattle.”

“You’re finally speaking sense, Neleth. How rare,” said Nefeh, rising from his chair. “You should make haste for the **Commander’s Bridge**, too. Our **Commander-in-Chief** not showing up for the long-awaited liftoff would be quite the affront.”

“I know that.”

One hour later, the **command squadron** with **Commodore Biboth** at the helm of its **flagship**, the *Scacaü*, entered **planar space** through the *Saudec Demeterr* (*Demeterh* Portal).

“**Quartermaster Linewing Starpilot** Lynn.”

Jint had been relaxing in his personal quarters when Ecryua’s transmission

came from the bridge.

“What’s up?”

Her little hologram (one tenth of Ecryua’s true size) replied: “How’s the cat?”

Jint’s eyes fell on the bunk, where Dyaho lay snoring. He had stretched out to such a length that he seemed like some kind of furry snake. “Well, by all appearances, he’s seen worse days. Is that all you wanted to ask?”

“No. There’s a message for you from outside.”

“Really?” That was unusual. “Who from?”

“It’s from the **Unit Commander**. I’ll put you through.”

“From the **Hecto-Commander**!? Hold on a second!”

Jint had no time to shake his panic before Ecryua’s image vanished, to be replaced by a life-size Atosryua appearing at the center of his room. Flustered, Jint fixed his uniform and saluted.

“Morning, **Quartermaster Linewing Starpilot**. Would you care to turn on the video output on your end as well?”

That was when Jint realized she wasn’t receiving video of him. “Good morning, **Hecto-Commander**. I’ll do so right away, ma’am.” After one final presentability check, he turned on his side’s live feed.

“Please don’t get so stiff. This transmission is over personal affairs.”

“Is that so?” Even now that he was told, point-blank, to drop the formality, he could ill afford to. It was more than just their difference in **rank**; it was everything that had happened three years prior.

“What is the purpose of your call, if I may ask?”

“I’m inviting you and **Deca-Commander** Abliar to a meal at The Three Craggs. I’ve made a reservation. Have you heard of it? It’s the restaurant with the nicest cuisine in *Dacruc*. Of course, it leaves something to be desired as a venue for **Her Highness the Viscountess** and **Your Excellency the Count**, but this is a warzone, so I trust you’ll understand. Plus, I’ve already tried it. The decor is a tad stark for it to be called a top-notch establishment, but the flavor isn’t as

lackluster as I'd expected. A little sweet for my tastes, to be sure, but nothing I couldn't bear. I hope you like your food a smidge sweet. So then..."

"Please, wait a moment," Jint cut in. "You're *inviting* us?"

"That's right," she nodded. "I'd love it if you and **Deca-Commander** Abliar could come."

Three days had passed since they'd confronted the recon-in-force patrol ship. In the end, they'd let two enemy vessels escape, and **Assault Unit 1** lost one vessel. Worse still, it was thought that the Three Nations Alliance's full-fledged counterattack was fast approaching. Yet here she was...

"You're inviting us?" Jint repeated. "But why?"

"I'm inviting you and **Deca-Commander** Abliar. You can't guess why?"

"Is this... is this about the incident with **His Excellency** the former **Baron**?"

"It is indeed," Atosryua nodded happily. "Tomorrow would have been his birthday, at least by my perception of relative time." When dealing with the galactic scale, the way individuals experienced the passing of time certainly varied.

"While I can't invite Clowar himself, I'd like to celebrate in some small way with people who knew him."

Which means if he could somehow make it to this birthday celebration, she wouldn't have extended me any such invitation. Or is this how she gets her revenge? fretted Jint. "I, uhh, I don't know if we could be said to have, well, *known* him..." he stammered.

"I know what you're trying to get across, but I think it's a sad inevitability. You two and I are the only ones in this star system who know him at all. Or are you telling me to celebrate by myself?"

"That isn't what I'm saying, no..." *What need is there to celebrate a dead man's birthday to begin with?* But Jint didn't give voice to that sentiment.

"Okay. I also have a favor to ask."

"Huh?"

“I’d like you to relay news of my invitation to **Deca-Commander** Abli — to **Her Excellency the Viscountess of Parhynh**. I know it’d be best if she heard it from me directly, but this is a personal affair. In the end, I...”

“I understand,” Jint nodded. Lafier would turn down the invitation for sure, which would give Jint a pretext to do the same.

“I’ll be the one to tell her...”

“Please do. And even if **Her Highness the Viscountess** turns me down, you’ll still attend, won’t you?” said Atosryua, stealing a march on him. “It’d be embarrassing to have to cancel that reservation.”

Jint blinked. “...Ah.” He never imagined he’d be dining with the **Baroness of Febdash**, just the two of them.

“Yes, yes of course,” agreed Jint, begrudgingly. Inwardly, he tut-tutted his own diffidence. Would his bad habit of catering instantly to the opposite party ever subside? He was sure it’d get him killed one of these days.

That, or it *had* already gotten him killed, and he simply had yet to manifest the symptoms.

“Be sure to make it as clear as possible to her that this is a *personal* invitation,” Atosryua smiled. “I’m counting on you.”

It was only after the transmission ended that it dawned on him: He himself had never actually conversed with Clowar.

To Jint’s surprise, Lafier accepted the invitation without hesitation.

“But we’re talking about *that* **baron**’s birthday here!” Jint reminded her, thinking she might have gotten the wrong idea, somehow.

“You mean the **former baron**,” said Lafier.

“Ah, right.” Whenever Jint heard the words “former baron,” it was always the old man, Clowar’s father, who sprang to mind. “But why are you thinking of celebrating the birthday of a man you killed with your own hands?”

Lafier gave him some brief side-eye, the usual *where is your common sense* look.

“Is it to atone, or something?”

Lafier’s expression turned sterner still.

“What, then?”

“Celebrating the birthday of the deceased bears a special meaning.”

“So it’s to mourn them?”

“Not quite.” Lafier paused to choose her words. “If you had no one to remember or miss you after passing away, would it not be painful? Would it not be sad?”

“I suppose it would,” said Jint. Hearing the words “sad” and “painful” issuing from Lafier’s lips was certainly novel.

“That’s why we make sure to join groups celebrating the birthdays of the dead as frequently as possible while we’re still alive. Doing so gives us the feeling that even after we’re gone, someone will be there to remember us.”

“I wonder if that holds for me.” Jint clasped his hands behind his head. Ten years ago, he had been told he was now an **Abh noble**. Three years ago, he had actually started living among the Abh. Yet despite that, he still had a world to learn about this race. “Well, I guess in my case, I haven’t got anybody who will mourn my passing very long after I die, so I’m not too inclined to join in.”

Before Jint knew it, Lafier was gazing his way with a strange look in her eyes. Jint returned the stare, only his was more quizzical. But Lafier had no words of reply.

The next day, the two of them headed for the **mobile canteen** (via **smallcraft**, given how they couldn’t take the entire *Basrogrh* and park it at *Dacruc*).

The Three Craggs was a restaurant of high grade, as befitting Atosryua’s recommendation. Most impressively, it employed human servers, even for opening the doors.

Like brother, like sister, huh.

Jint hadn’t forgotten **Former Baron** Clowar’s proclivities. The establishment’s interior shone under the sunlight, and a grass lawn blanketed the floor.

Meanwhile, attendants who exhibited courtesy rivalling palace chamberlains greeted them and led them to their room.

“**Your Highness the Viscountess of *Parhynh*, Your Excellency the Count of Hyde!**” shouted a staff member upon opening the doors to the reservation room.

Since the **Hecto-Commander** had emphasized this was a *personal invitation*, the two hadn’t donned their **military uniforms**. Lafier opted instead for a green **jumpsuit** and a light pink **long robe**, while her head was adorned with the **circlet** of a **royal princess**. Jint’s **jumpsuit** was a deeper green, his **long robe** white, and his **circlet** not that of a **linewing starpilot**, but rather a **count**’s more ornate model. Jint couldn’t help but feel tense; he seldom ever dressed this way.

A hexagonal window was cut into the room’s ceiling, through which poured the light reflected by Aptic III. Atosryua had already arrived, and when she spotted her invitees, she stood to give them a court-style bow. She too was decked in formal raiment, the dress of a **baroness**.

“I thank you for your invitation, Lonh-Lymr,” said Lafier, stopping to return the bow.

“Our gratitude,” said Jint, bowing after their example.

“I thank you on behalf of my dearly departed brother, for whom you’ve come here today, *Fiac, Lonh*,” she said graciously, voice devoid of the commander’s cadence with which she gave orders. Only after Lafier and Jint sat themselves down at the table did Atosryua follow suit.

“I implore you, make yourselves at home,” she said. “And you can forget about **Star Forces ranks** here, because in exchange, I’ll be forgetting about **imperial court hierarchy**. I hope you don’t mind if I’ve already ordered.”

They nodded.

Atosryua must have made some sort of signal that Jint failed to catch, because three waitstaff entered at that moment to lay the utensils. Then, **apple cider** was poured into the cup carved out of amethyst.

“To my brother,” said Atosryua, lifting it high.

Her invitees lifted their cups wordlessly.

“His remains are being taken towards the galaxy’s core via inertial navigation,” she confided after taking a sip. “Even if we had collected his body, we’d just send it out into space again anyway. Only, his will asks that his corpse be sent away from the galaxy toward the wider cosmos. Not that he’ll care much at all, seeing as he’s dead.”

“I’m very sorry about that,” said Lafier.

Lafier, the stoic’s stoic, appeared uneasy to Jint.

“No worries, **Your Highness**. My brother chose this path. Besides, his coffin is his ship, the **Lady of Febdash**. You can hardly find a more expensive coffin anywhere else,” she said. Then, she frowned. “I never liked that ship’s name. I thought it had to have been named after me, but I was sorely mistaken.”

“Who *was* it named after?” asked Jint, not out of true curiosity, but to demonstrate he was listening.

Atosryua shrugged. “I don’t know. A lover of his I’ve never met, maybe? It’s not as though he loved flying the ship itself so much he’d call it his love. Or maybe, he got it into his head that an Abh should enjoy flying through space above all else, enough to christen his ship with the name of a lover. How piteous he was. It’s bizarre, but it seems he felt being an Abh burdened him with some kind of psychological load.”

“I see.” A modicum of empathy for the departed **baron** rose inside him.

Atosryua gave him a sidelong glance. “Now that I dwell on it, it’s a peculiar combination. It’s almost like...” But she held her tongue.

“Don’t worry about me,” grinned Jint. He’d realized she thought he and Clowar’s circumstances similar. “It’s almost like each of us represents a different evolutionary link between Lander and Abh”

Lafier was a descendant of the most storied and pedigreed clan among all Abh clans. Atosryua, on the other hand, was, biologically speaking, a first-generation Abh. And Jint had been born a Lander, despite his current societal status as an Abh. If and when he sired children, they would be made genetically Abh.

“You have that wrong, Jint,” said Lafier. “We are no more ‘evolved’ than you are. We’ve simply diverged, branched off, to become the **Kin of the Stars**.”

“That’s right,” Atosryua concurred. “Evolution can’t be induced by manmade means, because normal humans can’t create anything ‘above’ humanity. We can’t create gods.”

“We were endowed with a single extraneous sense, and a longer lifespan than our ancestors. But that’s all,” said Lafier.

That’s not really a ‘that’s all’ to me, but okay, mused Jint resignedly, but he said nothing.

Their first course was served.

Lafier tasted a bite, and looked confused. “This...”

“Is it not to your liking, **Your Highness**?”

“No, that’s not it. But it’s...”

Jinto, too, brought his chopsticks to his mouth. Abhs preferred their food bland, and only recently had he gained the ability to distinguish between subtler flavors. The food before them was leaflike in shape, but seemed to be shellfish served cold. For all he could pick up, it didn’t taste bad.

“What’s the matter?” Jint asked the **royal princess**.

“It’s the same dish I was served by the **Baron** at Febdash.”

“Oh, is that what has you so concerned?” said Atosryua. “I tried to recreate what my brother set out for **Your Highness** when he hosted you. It was all recorded, you see. Is this troubling you?”

“No, it’s no trouble. I was just slightly taken aback,” she replied, chopsticks clamping on the appetizer. “Actually, I excused myself midway through your brother’s dinner of hospitality.”

“I didn’t know that,” said Atosryua, taking a gulp from her cup. “But that’s all the more reason I insist you stay till the end. It won’t be exactly the same down to every particular, but at the very least, it’s the same bill of fare. I was curious to see what kinds of courses he saw fit to feed **Your Highness** and Your Excellence.”

“I wasn’t there for it,” blurted Jint despite himself. “I was repasting with His Excellency the Former Baron — that is to say, your father, **Hecto-Commander**.”

“I didn’t know that, either.” At first, Atosryua looked surprised, but soon a sarcastic smile graced her lips. “So you were the only one my brother invited to dine with him, *Fiac*. I wouldn’t put it past him, not at all.”

“**Baroness**,” stated Lafier, “what is the point of all this? Do you bear a grudge against me?”

“*Fiac*,” replied Atosryua, her register suddenly turning much more formal, “short though the history of my barony may well be, we nonetheless have our pride. If I were to have invited you as a guest in order to air my grievances, then how would my descendants speak of their ancestor?”

“You’re right,” said Lafier, abashed. “Forgive me. It was foolish of me to ask.”

“I’ve good memories of time spent with my brother, too,” said Atosryua, reverting to the informal speaking style from before. “Mostly from when we were young children, mind you. We grew estranged after reaching adulthood, and rarely met each other from that point on.”

With that, the next course arrived. It was **sea turtle broth**.

“He liked the stuff,” said Atosryua, sipping from her bowl.

“You say that, but from what I saw, he didn’t seem very driven to partake of any,” said Lafier.

“Really?” Atosryua cocked her head. “He must’ve been nervous. His appetite always vanished when he got nervous. That’s how I could always tell when he was hiding something. He’d barely touch his food.”

“I see.”

“Uhh...” Jint figured he ought to join the conversation, too. “What else did he like?”

“Let’s see...” She knitted her brow. “His favorite food when he was a kid was cooked pears with molasses. I was always impressed he could put away so much food that was that sweet. Though I’m sure his tastes changed after growing up. Actually, the food here is a bit on the sweet side; I think he may

have liked it.”

Picturing Former Baron Clowar cheerfully having his fill of sweet fruit confections made his stomach churn.

“But the first thing that comes to mind when asked what he liked is dogs.”

Jint started. “What?”

“That is, as pets. You have a complicated background, yet you’ve yet to free yourself of your cultural bias,” she said, staring Jint in the eyes as she disabused him. “He liked dogs, but he kept a cat. I bet only because he believed cats were the preferable animal companion for Abhs. Have you ever had a cat, Lonh-Dreur?”

“I have one now. He’s **Her Highness’s** nephew.”

“Will you ever let me live that down?” Her tone was calm, gentle, and tinged from end to end with bloodlust.

Jint ducked his head.

“Oh dear...” said Atosryua, gauging their diverse expressions. “An inside joke, I take it. No matter.”

From there on out, it was Atosryua’s solo performance; she recounted her memories of her late brother at length. Lafier was relieved at this turn of events, and listened intently.

She must’ve taken her talkativeness from her father, Jint reflected. And he could sense how what she was doing was just another way to grieve.

When the meal was finished, they engaged in lighthearted conversation for a while, each holding a cup of relatively weak spirits in one hand. That said, the “conversation” was mostly one-sided, with Atosryua fulfilling the role of speaker. That phase of their get-together, too, drew to a close in about two hours’ time, and afterward, Jint and Lafier left the **mobile canteen Dacruc**.

“Even you were having a hard time of it back there,” said Jint, inside the small ship’s cockpit.

“I’m not great at mourning the dead,” she admitted.

“Well, the only words I ever traded with the **Baron** were salutations through a screen. That can’t even be called ‘speaking to him,’ if you ask me.”

“It’s not as though I spoke with him on a friendly basis, either.” She had taken off her **long robe**, but hadn’t changed out of her green **jumpsuit** in favor of her **military uniform** before manning the controls. “It’s a duty, remembering the dead. An obligation.”

“A duty, huh... if people only remember me because they’re duty-bound, then it’d be easier on everybody if they just forget me.”

“It’s not a duty to the dead. It’s a duty to the living.”

“I see.” Much like he was wont to do, he tried to see if he could make sense of it... and failed. When all was said and done, if he was any amount of dead, he was too dead to take note of the people remembering him. *They can treat me any way they like*, Jint thought to himself.

As they wove their way between the various ships revolving in orbit around Aptic III, they sighted the *Basrogrh*. Following the guidance of Sobash, who was still aboard, Lafier piloted the smallcraft back into the **assault ship**.

On the way to his personal quarters, he encountered Samson. “Heya. How was the meal out?”

“The food was all right,” said Jint, deliberately veering from what he didn’t feel like talking about. “It’s just so bland-tasting.”

“Too true, kid. Abh food’s not only bland, it’s also monotonous.”

“Monotonous?” Jint blinked.

Abh cuisine had its faults, but it was just as varied as any other. In fact, the food on his home planet of Martin was more monotonous. For one, they’d given him white-fleshed fish to eat nigh on every day when he was a child. The fish was grown in cultures, too, and invariably paired with potatoes.

“Yeah, monotonous. They rule the galaxy, but you wouldn’t guess it from their food,” said Samson. “I’m no chef, but I can make a thousand, maybe two thousand dishes off the top of my head. Everybody on my planet can. Granted,

there are a lot of ingredients that can't be found elsewhere."

"Question," said Jint. "Which do you like better, cats or dogs?"

"I love both, but if I was forced to choose, I'd have to go with cats."

Jint mustered his courage. "Is *that* your planet's unusual diet? Cats?"

"Cats are just a small part of a larger whole," he smirked meaningfully, before slapping Jint on the back.

"There's nothing to worry about; you won't ever find me famished enough to lay a hand on my friends' pets. Your cat's safe. From *me*, anyway. That said, don't let it enter the **bridge** too often. There's too much delicate machinery it could ruin. So if your little kitty cat sheds some fur on my gizmos, and they start going on the fritz, I might just get a hankering for a nice plate of *lutimond*."

"'Lutimond'?" Apart from the name of a recipe, he couldn't guess what else that word might mean.

"It's a stew that makes use of the meat of a certain animal. Haven't had any in twenty whole years."

"Twelve **sub-fleets**, huh..." muttered Neleth as he scanned the ship formation diagram. Seven **assault sub-fleets**, two **recon sub-fleets**, two **supply sub-fleets**, and one **strike sub-fleet**: the forces that comprised the *Raicporiac Apticer* (Aptic Defensive Fleet) under his command.

"That's just the right number, Neleth," said Nefeh. "Look."

The two were on the Commander's Bridge of the *Scacaü*, which was currently sailing through **planar space** toward the **Aptic Portal**. As **Chief of Staff**, Nefeh had taken responsibility for on-duty staff officers, so it was only the *Biboth* brothers.

Another table rose up next to the ship formation diagram currently hovering at the center of the bridge. Two polygonal lines were intersecting.

"More than twelve **sub-fleets**, and the pre-stocked supplies won't suffice to cover all ships, which in turn limits their options. Besides, we can't afford to let them deploy in large numbers anyway," said Nefeh.

“That’s only if we stick to the **portal** to hold it down, isn’t it?”

“Is that not your plan?”

“No, it is,” Neleth unwittingly admitted. “Still, I hate it when you assume what moves I’ll make.”

“Let’s go over the potential strategy of engaging them in **planar space**, then. We’d be contending with at least fifteen **sub-fleets**’ worth of enemy ships. Without much hope of enough reinforcements to be able to hold out, either, Neleth.”

“I know.”

“If you know, then...”

“I’m telling you, I *know*, Nefeh.”

“I’m used to it so I don’t mind, but that attitude is unbecoming, Neleth.”

“Oh, you’re the only one I take this attitude with, Nefeh.”

“Should I take it as a mark of honor?”

“Maybe.”

Nefeh shook his head, as if to say *good grief*, before a transmission from the ship commander came in from within the ship, informing them they’d soon be passing through the **Aptic Portal**.

“Pull up video of the outside, Nefeh.”

“You can do that yourself. It takes nothing.”

“**Rank** is absolute in the world of the military.”

“I know, Neleth.” Nefeh moved his arm a tiny amount, and the walls and ceiling of the bridge became see-through. More accurately, they were displaying live video of the outside, making it *seem* as though they’d turned transparent.

The “skies” were an ashen grey: the color of the inner surface of the **space-time bubble** they were using to locomote through **planar space**.

“Attention, all hands. E-minus one minute until we pass through **Aptic**

Portal.”

At last, it came time for the countdown. “...Five, four, three, two, one, passing through.”

The grey dispelled, and they were greeted once again by the shining array of the stars which shrouded the heavens. In front lay the planet of Aptic III. Behind it, the sun of Aptic could be seen, albeit barely, as it radiated its vivid rays of light. Also visible were the near countless **Star Forces** ships making circuits around the planet.

“Look, there’s our battlefield,” said Nefeh, in enraptured tones.

“A **battle in 3-space**, huh... Even after obtaining the power to dart around a different dimension? Talk about backsliding.”

“What are you talking about, Neleth? It’s during **battles in 3-space** that we, the **Kin of the Stars**, can exhibit our true mettle. And think of the size of the battlefield, the canvas. Don’t you think there’s *artistry* to be had here?”

“Weren’t you the one who said victory is everything?” teased Neleth.

“Yes, but if it happens to be artistic in the end, then who’s to complain? Just don’t make it your *objective*, my beloved brother. Unlike you, I am a man of good sense.”

“If you’re a man of good sense, then I don’t want anything to do with ‘good sense’ for the rest of my days, Nefeh.”

Chapter 6: The *Goïc Raïchacarr* (Eve of the Showdown)

The principal force of the **Phantom Flame Fleet** was in the process of amassing in the Darmap Star System. From here, it was possible to flexibly respond to an enemy incursion into either Miskehrr or Aptic.

“Has the main force of the enemy entered Wimber?” said *Dusanh*, gazing at the **planar space map** on the **Commander’s Bridge** of the top flagship, the *Sancaü*. Having just awoken, the man was still drowsy.

Wimber had been under **Star Forces** occupation, but owing to the enemy’s full-fledged counterattack, they had their forces retreat. As such, the enemy had recaptured the area bloodlessly. And because they knew it would happen, Command was hardly shocked by the news.

“That they’ve come to Wimber means they have their eyes on Aptic.” *Dusanh* turned to face the **Chief of Staff** while stifling a yawn.

“Most likely,” said Kenesh.

“How goes the concentration of ships?”

At *Dusanh*’s query, symbols denoting **sub-fleets** appeared on the **planar space map**.

“Mostly smoothly. Some **sub-fleets** are experiencing delays getting there, but nothing too unreasonable.” Groups of ships that were taking longer than scheduled were color-coded yellow. And just as she’d told him, there wasn’t much yellow to speak of.

“Then we don’t need to change the scheduled assembly time.” *Dusanh* looked down at the **wristgear** on his left wrist. “That’s 54 hours from now, I see.”

“Yes.”

“Now tell me, what of the enemy’s forces?”

The closer both sides of the war were drawing to each other, the more clearly the other side's scope of power could be ascertained. Consequently, more detailed information must have trickled in while he was asleep.

"They have roughly 170 **sub-fleets**' worth, with a margin of error of fifteen **sub-fleets**' worth," Kenesh replied promptly.

"That's fewer than was estimated, if I recall," he said.

"The ratio of **patrol ships** exceeded the values we predicted. That's why."

"Hum..." *Dusanh* stroked his pointy chin and fixed his eyes on the speculative formation diagram of the enemy fleet. He saw her point; the ratio of patrol ships was far larger than the standard. "Perhaps they've learned a thing or two from before."

The **Imperial Star Forces** and the Three Nations Alliance had done battle three years prior. The Abh had fulfilled their objective of defending *Lacmhacarh*, and so it could be called a **Star Forces** victory, but in reality it was a draw that resulted in both sides retreating to lick their wounds. Following that, both sides poured their blood, sweat, and souls into reconstructing their respective fleets. And from the looks of things, the enemy may just have prioritized outfitting patrol ships.

"They may be thinking it more effective to put resources into making **patrol ships** that would otherwise be going toward scads of **assault ships**," wondered the **Chief of Staff** aloud.

"That is the conclusion they may have drawn, yes. And all the many **patrol ship** devotees in our own ranks may be right to take heart."

"And yet..." Kenesh paused to think. "The technology of war hasn't evolved much over the past 200 years. So it's not as though things have gotten less favorable for **assault ships** recently."

"It's also been two hundred years since the **Empire** last battled against a worthy adversary. Before now, the largest real war was the Shashyne Campaign. Even then, Shashyne's heft as a nation was less than a fourth of the Empire's. Moreover, their political power didn't necessarily equate to military power, as they had a fatal weakness somewhere. This war is different, though.

We're not fighting a lesser power."

"Are you saying the enemy learned a lesson from the previous battle that the **Star Forces** haven't?"

"I can't know for sure," said *Dusanh* readily. "It's not clear whether the enemy actually drew the correct conclusion, after all. But as one might conclude from when we intercepted their reconnaissance-in-force days ago, it might indeed be cruel of us to have **assault ships** face off against **patrol ships**. Against that many patrol ships, assault ships may well be useless."

"If that's the case, then the forces we've been given become inapplicable."

"Yes," *Dusanh* laughed lightly. "But let's save the complaining for after we make it back to the **imperial capital** *Lacmhacarh*. For now, all we can do is try to manage with the forces we have."

"But it's uncertain whether victory is ours."

"I've known that from the beginning. We'll be needing Mr. *Biboth* and his men and women to do their very best."

"Shall we send ships from Miskehrr?" advised Kenesh.

"We have made no call for reinforcements," said *Dusanh*, waving his hand no. "As such, that won't be necessary. There's no guarantee the enemy won't take us by surprise by invading Miskehrr instead. And even in the event that the main battlefield is Aptic as predicted, we can't afford to leave Miskehrr too undefended. And most importantly, it's too dangerous to haphazardly relocate troops at this late hour."

"I understand all of that, but..." Kenesh persisted.

Dusanh smirked. "I suppose you're less worried about ship relocation, and more about leaving things to **Commodore Biboth**? Allow me to say that while it's true that clan is prone to becoming wrapped up in eccentric ideas, they are largely sound and reliable on the battlefield. Well, at least Mr. Neleth is. Besides, he has an outstanding **Chief of Staff** by his side."

"That 'outstanding **Chief of Staff**' is another *Biboth*!"

"I see you truly have no faith in the *Biboth* clan," said *Dusanh*, slightly

nonplussed. “Could it be that some personal experience is what’s making you say so?”

“I plead my right to remain silent,” said Kenesh.

“I understand. However... Tell me, at least, that it wasn’t an experience with one or both of the *Biboth* twins?”

“I’m telling you I don’t wish to answer that question.”

“I see.” *Dusanh* blinked. “Then, which of them was it? The **Commander-in-Chief**, or the **Chief of Staff**?”

“I’m telling you, I don’t. Wish. To answer.”

“I see, I see.” *Dusanh* nodded emphatically. “Now then, I shall be in the living room. I have much to mull over. If something should happen, please summon me.”

“**Your Highness**,” said Kenesh, her tone exceedingly sharp. “What is it you need to ‘mull over’?”

“That, I will not say.”

And so *Dusanh* savored the taste of victory.

“There’s a shortage of **propellant**?” asked Neleth.

Upon learning that the enemy had advanced to Wimber, a command meeting was being held in the strategy room of the *Glagac Raicporiar Apticer* (Aptic Defensive Fleet Flagship), the *Scacaü*.

“Yes. The sufficiency rate is at 70%,” reported the *casariac sobér* (supply staff officer), “given that our fleet must do **battle in 3-space**.”

“Right, right.” Neleth leaned his upper body against the back of his seat.

Unlike with **planar space navigation**, *dadhoth* (3-space navigation) expended large amounts of **propellant**. And since water was used the most as propellant, it was water that they lacked. They had a supply chain of water from Aptic IV, but due to issues with carrying capacity, they hadn’t stockpiled enough of it. And that was the biggest problem gnawing at the **Aptic Defensive Fleet**. It was

limiting what they could do strategically, and might even cause their defeat.

Neleth gave it some thought, and arrived at a conclusion he thought brilliant. “We have more water than we know what to do with!”

“Where?” Nefeh’s gaze was dubious, to say the least.

“There.” Neleth pointed toward Aptic III, which was being displayed on the walls of the strategy room, with his **command baton**.

“Tell me that isn’t a planet with great big gobs of the stuff! And we’ll pay proper attention to changes in the weather, too. Surely they won’t mind us pumping out a tad bit of their water. Let’s negotiate with the **landworld administration** this instant and—”

“We can’t,” Nefeh pointed out quietly.

“We can’t? We can’t what?” Neleth looked blankly.

“We can’t negotiate with the **landworld administration**, because the administration of the Aptic Star System hasn’t surrendered. It hasn’t become a ‘landworld administration’ yet; it’s still technically an enemy planet. Or at least, that’s what they’re claiming.”

“They haven’t surrendered?” Neleth stared unblinkingly at the footage of the blue orb. “They haven’t surrendered!?”

“That is correct,” said Nefeh, and the staff officers nodded in unison.

“Wasn’t expecting that...”

“I wasn’t expecting a **Commander-in-Chief** such as yourself to not know that, Neleth.”

“It’d never normally cross your mind, would it? That the **landworld**’s political situation would have any bearing on our battle? Wait... Then what are we even defending, exactly? We’re to defend an enemy planet from the enemy?”

“This is why they call you barmy, Neleth. We’re defending the **Aptic Portal**. Isn’t that obvious?”

“I suppose so.” Unfortunately, his brother’s opinion did contain a kernel of truth, and he was forced to admit it.

“In any case, pumping water out of that landworld would be tantamount to pillaging it.”

To the Abh, anything that was floating in space was theirs, no matter who constructed it. But on the other side of that coin, they recognized **landworld** resources as belonging to landworld peoples, and cared not for taking them by force.

“‘Pillaging,’ you say...” That sounded like sweet music to his ears. “How many years has it been since the **Star Forces** engaged in any *pillaging*?”

“Do you intend to start pillaging the place, Neleth?” Nefeh frowned.

“I do. Don’t you think there’s artistry to be had there?”

“I don’t,” Nefeh answered instantly.

“Come on, Nefeh, our **propellant** shortage is a practical problem, and in order to win, we can’t be choosy about our methods.”

“You may be right about that,” said the **Chief of Staff**, who crossed his arms and sank into deep thought. “War is a duel, after all...”

“It is at that,” Neleth nodded vigorously. “Which is why we should be pillaging aplenty!”

“All right, if it’s necessary for victory, then let’s pillage their water,” Nefeh acceded at last.

That moment, somebody coughed. It was the starpilot in charge of resolving technical issues, the *Casariac Sair* (Engine Staff Officer).

“What?” said Neleth, thinking it noisome.

“How in heavens would we pull it off?” asked the officer.

“How, you say...” The **Commander-in-Chief** was at a loss for words; this was a sucker punch.

“Aptic III’s oceans lie at the bottom of a thick atmosphere and gravity well. Getting water pumped from there would be the height of inefficiency. It’d even be more efficient to have water supplied from our base regions through **planar space**.”

“But if we do that, we’ll be left with a shortage!” Neleth fired back.

“And the same would be true for taking it from that planet.”

“I agree,” said the **Supply Staff Officer**.

Abh ships weren’t made for atmosphere entry, with small-scale **traffic ships** and **airship fleet lussomiac** (amphibious assault ships) as the only real exceptions. Even then, water was bulky and unwieldy to transport, so there was a limit to how much could be carried by a **transport ship**, and there were no **amphibious assault ships** on Aptic. “If you order me to, we can compare the outcomes of sending for **amphibious assault ships** and of getting it supplied from home?” added the **supply officer**.

“That won’t be necessary.” The gears in Neleth’s head were whirring. “Maybe we don’t need to dip all the way down to the bottom of the atmosphere. Perhaps we could collect the moisture in the air...”

“We don’t have the equipment for that onboard,” the officer replied.

“With a little bit of time, I could try making one with the materials we have on hand, but it’s doubtful we could wangle it before the battle breaks out,” said the **engine officer**.

“A bit of time being how much time, exactly?”

“Around a year.”

“Okay, okay, fine, we’ll make do with what we have,” said Neleth, resigning himself to the fact that pillaging was not an option.

Meanwhile, Nefeh bit his lip. “This must be one of the reasons why the **Star Forces** don’t typically pillage for resources.”

“It’s a crying shame,” said Neleth as he stared at the live feed of the blue orb ruefully. “To think we aren’t able to lay claim to what’s right before our eyes.”

“That should hardly be a new experience to you, Neleth,” chuckled Nefeh.

“You’re one to talk, Nefeh.”

“True. Since one never knows whether you’ll try regardless. Now then, let’s resume the strategy meeting — the *proper* strategy meeting.”

“Of course.” *I won’t forget that slight, Nefeh*, he stewed as he sat back down.

“I will now present my battle strategy. I’m open to hearing your opinions.”

Then he pulled up the deployment diagram he had made in advance. A Hologram of Aptic III appeared above the strategy room table. Orbiting the planet was the phosphorescent sphere that was the **Aptic Portal**, which was encased in a spherical shell composed of red points of light.

“These are **mobile space-time mines**. We’ll be taking some from **battle-line ships** to lay out in advance. Of course, the resupply mines stocked by the **supply ships** will be taken as well.”

Then orange points of light began concealing the spherical shell. “These are **assault ships** and defense ships. Even further out, we’ll have...”

Yellow points of light appeared in scattered spots. While the red and orange lights were so numerous and densely concentrated as to completely hide the portal, the yellow lights, by contrast, were individually discernable, and didn’t hide the layers of red and orange. “These are our **patrol ships**. This is the distribution planned out by the **flagship**.”

The points closest to the planet among the yellow lights flickered. Then, purple lights emerged above the yellow layer, even more sparsely scattered than the patrol ships. “These are the **battle-line ships**.”

“This is quite the solid deployment plan, for you,” said Neleth in astonishment. “It might even reach the level of average.”

“Thank you,” smiled Neleth. “Now I will explain the strategy’s sequence of events.”

Ninety percent of the lights cleared off the diagram. The **mine** layer was now completely concealed by the assault ships layer. **Aptic Portal**’s surface twinkled in the spaces between the four overlapping spherical shells. Then, the red lights got sucked into the portal.

“Right before the enemy passes through into **3-space**, we will send the **mines** into **planar space**.”

Afterward, the outermost layer, the purple dots, broke their spherical

formation and began moving toward the opposite side of the planet Aptic. However, they soon stopped in their tracks, to return to their previous positions.

“After they will have managed the flow of the **mines**, I originally considered having the **battle-line ships** retreat, since they would have already unloaded, but if we’re short on **propellant**, that’s a luxury we can’t afford. The battle-line ships will remain in place, so let’s have them play the role of propellant resupply ships.”

A thin red line extended from the orange and yellow like a thread toward **Aptic Portal**. “Next, it’s the **patrol ships** and **assault ships**’ cue. We’ll be having them attack the enemy while their vanguard’s peeking out of the portal. They are to prevent them from entering into a full-scale **3-space** invasion. And that is my strategy. I believe it to be the most logical, with the least occurrence of friendly fire. We must hold out for at most 72 hours, until the main force arrives.”

Having finished, Neleth looked around at the officers’ faces. “Any objections?”

“I don’t think so,” said Nefeh. “A truly average strategy. It’ll probably go well enough.”

“It’s an amazing plan,” lauded the **Engine Staff Officer**. “So un-*Biboth*!”

Both twins glared at the engine officer.

It was Nefeh who let the staff officers go. He shifted his gaze to his brother and said: “We’ll work out the details. You do us a favor and go do **Commander-in-Chief** things.”

“Oh, would I be getting in the way?” Neleth scowled.

“Yep,” Nefeh nodded. “You’ve come up with a pretty prudent plan, so we need you to attend to your office work before you dash it all with some cockamamie idea.”

“You’ve got quite the mouth on you.” Neleth glanced at the **adjutant** waiting by the door. “But you have a point. How did I become a commander to begin with? It’s positively woeful,” he continued, stroking his **command baton**.

“You’re not suited to be a staff officer, Neleth.”

“Neither are you, Nefeh. Though we differ in that you’re just as unsuited to be a commander as you are to be a staff officer.” Neleth stood up before continuing. “You’re correct; I am fulfilling my duties as a commanding officer. Now, I’ll say it once, and I’ll say it again: Don’t mess up my plan.”

But Nefeh wasn’t listening. He was already focusing hard on the task of drawing up a rough timetable in order to be able to decide on all of the particulars alongside his subordinates.

Subsequently, Neleth left the strategy room with his **adjutant**, but not without feeling a strange sense of alienation.

The five ships of **Assault Squadron 1058’s Assault Unit 1** were now connected by link-pipes; there were six in a radial pattern, with one in excess. The one originally meant for the *Luzrogrh*, which had fallen in the battle.

Lafier leapt from the *Basrogrh*’s **air lock room** through a link-pipe, flying across its interior thanks to a practiced, elegant motion only a race that lived among the stars could pull off. The wind whooshed past her ears, her bluish-black hair trailing behind.

When the section where the link-tubes were joined drew near enough, she changed her orientation in midair in a single movement, and canceled her speed by putting her hands to the distorted walls.

The tube-joint section was hexagonal in shape. There, she encountered the **Captain** of the *Cidrogrh*, **Deca-Commander Béïcarh**. “Hey there, **Your Highness**,” he greeted her light-heartedly.

Lafier saluted. “I am just a **Deca-Commander**. I’d appreciate it if you refrained from addressing me as ‘*Fïac*.’”

“Don’t sweat that stuff. It’s not often **gentry** like me get to speak on equal terms with **Your Highness**, you know.”

“Then do as you will.”

Unlike Jint whenever he was called a “*Lonh-Dreur*,” Lafier never felt

uncomfortable hearing herself addressed as “*Fiäc*.” After all, that was what she’d been called since birth. That being said, whenever she was called “*Fiäc*” by colleagues, she got the sense they didn’t recognize her as having come into her own as a person.

“Hate to say it, but we didn’t really show you our best back there, huh?” said *Béïcarh*.

“You were merely unlucky,” she said, figuring that he was referring to that time during the attack on the patrol ship when they space-time fused with a **mine** and dropped out of their column. “And seeing as your ship hasn’t been destroyed, there ought to be no one who’d doubt your skills as a soldier.”

“Well, guess I can’t argue with that,” he replied, scratching his azure head of hair. “Though if I get ‘unlucky’ more than once, then my skills will be in doubt. Just gotta be extra careful next time.”

“I believe we’ll be late if we don’t make haste,” Lafier said, urging him to come with. Then she jumped through the link-pipe connecting to the **lead assault ship**, the *Gamrogrh*.

“Whoa nelly,” said *Béïcarh*, looking moved, “I just got invited by a **royal princess** of the **Empire** to accompany her. That won’t happen again for as long as I live, I’m sure of it.”

They arrived at the **air lock room** of the *Gamrogrh* in no time, with *Béïcarh* lagging seconds behind.

Lafier wasn’t entirely thrilled being next to him, but she couldn’t help how it had played out, and so they walked down the *Gamrogrh*’s passageway side-by-side. The time had come for the **Assault Unit 1** Captains’ Meeting.

Of course, in such a large-scale battle between fleets, there was no need for any in-depth review. They were an assault unit, and units were the lowest-level formations there were in the Star Forces. Moreover, since they’d be waging the upcoming **battle in 3-space**, there was nothing preventing them from maintaining constant contact with each other even as they engaged in combat.

Indeed, this “Captains’ Meeting,” such as it was, was largely a formality, a Star Forces convention of sorts. And the so-called “lead assault ship” was no larger

than the others, differing only in that it carried the Captain-cum-**Unit Commander Hecto-Commander**, as well as a **staff officer** and an **adjutant**.

Given the ship's ordinary size, there wasn't the space for a dedicated meeting room. Instead, the **captains** convened in the Starpilot Mess Hall. Lafier entered through the mess hall door, only to find the other two already there. After a moment's waiting, Atosryua entered with her military-issue **one-winged circlet** equipped, and her staff officer and adjutant in tow.

The captains stood up and saluted. Atosryua saluted back, and took a seat. She waited for her subordinates to be seated before speaking.

"There won't be any resupply," she said without preamble. "Not that we couldn't see that coming, of course. Looks like we'll have to learn to be happy fighting with the numbers we have."

That meant the ship that would be coming to replace the one they lost in the previous engagement wouldn't make it in time for the next one.

Holograms of Aptic III and the **Aptic Portal** floated above the mess table.

"I'll be stationed here." A luminous dot appeared on the side of the **Aptic Portal** opposite the planet. "The mission we've been given is straightforward. Strike down all enemy ships that come in our sights. That is all."

"That's straightforward all right," spoke *Béïcarh*. "But for how long will we have to keep that up? It's not like we can afford to bop enemy ships as they peek out of the portal forever."

"Seventy-two hours at most," answered Atosryua. "Or so the *Glagamh Raicporér* (Defensive Fleet Command Center) tells me. I can't guarantee you anything, but all we can do for now is believe. And don't ask me any more beyond that; I'm nothing more than an **Assault Unit Commander**."

"I see," he said, saying no more. His expression was less than pleased.

What's the point of asking? thought Lafier. Even if higher-level command predicted wrong, there was little use griping about it after the fact.

"Any other questions?" asked Atosryua, her head slightly to one side. She and Lafier's lines of sight met. Maybe it was just her imagination, but she thought

she saw Atosryua's eyes soften.

"Very well. Note that if we allow them to exit the **portal**, we lose. But we should focus all of our efforts on carrying out our respective assignments. There's nothing to be gained by sparing any thought to the zones assigned to other units. And while that's easier on us, it's also worrying in its own way. Some among you will rise in the ranks and command large fleets, but when that happens, I want you to remember this feeling."

"How about you **Hecto-Commander**," Lafier found herself asking. "Do you wish to take command of a large fleet?"

"Who, me?" Atosryua's lips curled into a grin. "I'll pass on that, **Deca-Commander**. I have enough obligations as it is with my shabby little **domain**, so I'm hardly dying to command more and bigger ships on top of that. You could say the difference between **nobles** and **Imperials** is that I can be selfish in this regard. Oh, and another difference: for Imperials, their **star-fiefs** stand as diversions in their eyes, whereas for us nobles, they take over our lives."

Were those words aimed specifically at me? Lafier wondered.

"Now then, if you would," said Atosryua, signaling to her adjutant.

Carefully, the adjutant took a bottle from the decorative shelf installed on the wall. The sweet-and-sour fragrance of **apple cider** wafted their way. Pouring her own cup last, Atosryua lifted it up, and the Captains did likewise.

"I left half of the bottle's contents unpoured," she said, eyes on the bottle atop the table. "Let's drink the other half after the battle. If we five don't assemble here again, it won't go empty. Let's toast to the bottle that we'll be unburdening."

Lafier didn't particularly like **apple cider**, but she drank her portion all at once.

"Now, I know you're all busy in one way or another. This ends the ceremony. You're free to go!"

Alone in the *Basrogrh's* Starpilot Mess Hall, Samson was nursing a distilled liquor made from corn. He was all for that rustic flavor.

One of the mess hall's walls was showing video of the outside. Countless ships on a starry backdrop. Actually, there was no way to tell whether or not a handful of those "stars" were actually faraway ships themselves. It was a magnificent vista, but he was already tired of it.

"Drinking, I see," he heard Sobash say.

"Hello there, **Senior Starpilot**," he replied, raising his head and his cup. "Doesn't look like I'll be getting another chance for a while, so here I am, knocking one back while I can."

"It's a bad habit," said Sobash, who took a seat facing him. "Can I have some?"

"You just said it's a bad habit..." said Samson, surprised.

"Yes, what of it?" he replied with a puzzled air. "I'm fond of bad habits."

"Oh, I like you," Samson laughed throatily, pouring the Senior Starpilot a cup.

"Thanks." Sobash had himself a sip.

"Is it true that Abhs-by-birth don't get drunk?"

"We can get tipsy," said Sobash. "But no drunken stupors, no. It's in our genes. Though if someone were to inject alcohol directly into one's veins, that would be a different story... Come to think of it, they might die of acute toxicosis before they experienced drunkenness. In any case, we can't get 'blackout-drunk' imbibing orally."

"To genetic engineering!" Samson raised his cup once again. "But if you ask me, that's a curse more than anything else. There must be times when you want to forget it all."

"During times like that, we ought only to take sleeping pills and doze."

"How health-conscious."

"We Abhs are a race hale of mind and body."

"Though it seems like half of humanity doesn't really agree with you there."

"We can't be meeting everyone's highest expectations all the time."

"Abhs caring what others expect of them? This is the first I'm hearing of this."

“Yes. In truth, I haven’t heard of such a thing, either,” Sobash admitted. “But I can’t declare that it’s never happened. Never mind that; you’re oddly argumentative today.”

“You haven’t seen me drunk before, **Senior Starpilot.**”

“Even though I have a feeling this is not a rare state for you?”

“Usually I’m just drinking. I’m not *drunk*.”

“I see,” said Sobash, in all seriousness. “So at the moment, you are drunk.”

“I’m up to my second bottle,” said Samson, picking up the bottle with a third of its contents remaining for Sobash to see.

“Do you always drink that much?”

“No, I treat myself like this once a year. Usually I stop at the ‘tipsy’ mark.”

“Is today a special day for you?”

“Soon we’ll have to deal with enemy ships in ten times our numbers. I think it’ll be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.”

“That is true,” Sobash concurred. “If it weren’t so rare, that lifetime wouldn’t be terribly long.”

“You’ve got that right.”

Sobash polished off his cup in next to no time, and he pushed it forward for a refill without a hint of reservation. Samson poured him another glass, parting with the booze with some regret.

“When the battle’s over, I’ll get you whatever brand you like,” Sobash smiled, his expression finally reflecting his mood.

“Much obliged. And since I’ve heard you’ve got money to spare, I won’t hold back.”

“I think the rumors of my wealth are exaggerated. But you won’t need to hold back.”

“I’m looking forward to it. I’ll keep that bottle as a personal treasure. I’ll search for a bottle that’ll put the fortune you’ve amassed into decline, **Senior Starpilot.**”

“Will you now,” he stated with all the leeway in the world, downing the glass as soon as it was poured. “I too look forward to that.”

“I’ve never felt happier pouring somebody else my hard-earned booze,” said Samson cheerily, filling both of their cups anew. “Not to change the subject, but what do you think of our **Captain, Senior Starpilot?**”

“What do you mean?” Sobash raised an eyebrow.

“Oops, almost forgot Abhs don’t get drunk.”

“It doesn’t matter if you’re drunk, or if it won’t be leaving this room, you won’t be getting any secrets leaking out of these lips.”

“Then please keep this a secret, too: I don’t feel entirely at ease with a 19-year-old **Captain** at the helm.”

“Is it her age you take issue with? I don’t think she’s too young to captain an **assault ship**. After all, what an **Assault Ship Captain** needs the most is great reflexes. If you ask me, I often think it might be best to leave complicated matters such as **planar space navigation** to the staff and recruit children as assault ship captains. Of course, bringing children to warzones isn’t exactly the height of sound ethics.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I’m not doubting her skills. It’s just... I’ve been working in the **Star Forces** for nearly twenty years now. And sometimes, I think how the **Captain** was just coming out of her **artificial womb** around when I entered the military.”

Sobash seemed dumbfounded. “I’m sorry, **Linewing**. I’m afraid I don’t understand your dilemma.”

“Ignore me. It’s just a drunk man’s drivel.” He was aware that he was slurring, but he couldn’t help it.

“I do have one concern. I doubt the **Captain** is the right person for the job.”

“Oh?” Samson’s line of sight lifted away from the table.

“To be frank, I’m rather disappointed. The Abliars are a clan of many a legend, yet the **Captain** I know is surprisingly calm and gentle.”

“Her? Calm and gentle?”

“Much more so than I was expecting. Maybe she herself feels out of place. She’s probably not suited toward a position where she has to take orders from above. She might shine in a role with more discretionary power, or working by herself.”

“‘Out of place,’ huh? Now that you mention it, that kid said something along those lines,” said Samson, recalling Jint. The young man was also baffled and bemused by his own status as a count. “If I can indulge in a little self-reflection, I might have to call what I’m feeling a sense of being ‘out of place,’ too. When I was an **NCC**, I was surrounded by **landworlders** of all ages and varieties. But now that I’m on the **bridge**, I’m surrounded by young Abhs. You’re older than I am, **Senior Starpilot**, but you look young as a punk — ahem, forgive my slip of the tongue. Anyway, when the only other landworlder on the bridge comes, not only is he young, but he’s a ‘Lonh-*Dreur*’ to boot. It’s got me outta sorts.”

Sobash looked on with a strange expression. It was then Samson realized he’d been speaking not in Baronh but in the language of his home. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry, I don’t mind. Just don’t expect me to have a reply for you.”

Samson laughed. “Right, right.” Not that he could pinpoint what was so funny.

Sobash’s voice resounded as though in a dream: “**Linewing**, if you’re going to fall asleep, I suggest you do so in your own quarters.”

“If I bring the cat to the **bridge**, Mr. Samson’s mood turns sour,” Jint told Ecryua, demurring in a roundabout way.

Ecryua was on duty on the bridge, but her mind was on Dyaho, as per usual. Jint didn’t particularly mind if Dyaho became Ecryua’s pet for all intents and purposes, but what he did mind was being at the end of Samson’s bellyaching.

“Why would that anger the **Inspector Supervisor**?” she asked as she rubbed the cat’s throat.

“Apparently cat fur gets into the precision instruments...”

“That’s a superstition,” said Ecryua, shooting that down in three words. “Human hair is just as bad. That’s why all of the machines here have countermeasures implemented.”

“That’s what I thought, too, but I think it’s a matter of esteem for Samson,” speculated Jint. “I think he feels the machines he’s responsible for are being treated more carelessly than necessary.”

“The **supervisor**’s esteem, and my pleasure,” she all but sang, “we all know which is more important.”

“Fine, I don’t mind, as long as you’re the one who’ll explain it to him — the reason why we’ve brought him to the **bridge**.”

“If he asks,” she answered tersely.

I’ll never get her to promise me more than that, Jint resigned himself.

“Gotta say, though, you really love cats.”

“I hate cats.”

“What!? Why?” Jint stared blankly.

“Back at my place, we have a lot of cats. But I’m the only human my parent raised. So I was bullied.”

“Bullied? By the cats?”

“Who else was there to bully me?”

“Then why so much affection for my cat?”

“Because it’s your cat,” she said, her head cocked slightly as she gazed at Jint interrogatively.

“Huh?”

“If I told you that, would that make you happy?”

“I guess,” Jint smiled wryly. This must be Ecryua’s sense of humor. At least, assuming that would be the safest course of action. “But I don’t get why you’d be so interested in me.”

“Because you’ll age,” she answered, much to his surprise.

“Say what now?”

“What’s it feel like to age?” Her eyes, which were typically devoid of emotion, now sparkled with innocent curiosity.

What a brutal question, thought Jint. He had a feeling he'd just been presented with an unforeseen facet of the Abhs. But then... On second thought, maybe I shouldn't be so surprised. These entities known as the Abh can be startlingly insensitive from time to time.

"Couldn't tell you. It'll be a while yet before I've grown old."

"I see." If Ecryua was disappointed, he couldn't tell through her expression. "Then I'll ask the **Inspector Supervisor**."

"I think you should think twice before asking him. Samson's at that age between young and old," said Jint, feeling duty-bound to keep her from making that mistake.

After spending around three hours in his personal **microgravity-garten**, *Dusanh* showed his face at the bridge, where the **command personnel** were working as busily as ever.

At the center of the bridge stood **Chief of Staff** Kenesh with her arms folded, watching over her subordinate staff officers.

"I've given it some thought," he told her. He saw an unveiled wariness creep across her face. "It's not about your checkered past with one of the *Biboth* brothers, if that's what you're worried about."

"Excellent, that's a relief. But then, what is it about?"

"Why don't we try making **Fleet 1** a little denser?"

"**Fleet 1**? You mean you want to concentrate the **patrol ships** closer together?"

"That's right," *Dusanh* nodded. The man had not spent his time in the **microgravity-garten** idly. He had been gazing at the fleet formation diagram, and pondering how many **recon sub-fleets** (which were patrol ship corps) could be extracted from each fleet. "I believe we can scrape together twelve more **sub-fleets**."

"It would be thirteen **sub-fleets** at the most," she corrected him instantly.

"Is there something I missed?" *Dusanh* shrugged. "That aside, I see you've

already looked into it.”

“I wasn’t the one who looked into it. It was the officers under me.”

“Yes, of course. And I don’t doubt you’ve already weighed the pros and cons of this formation shake-up.”

“There are too many uncertain factors with regards to the enemy’s formations, tactics, et cetera, for us to weigh the pros and cons with any confidence. To put it simply, there’s no way to verify whether concentrating the **patrol ships** to the extreme is the right move.”

“Then if I were to order you to fortify **Fleet 1**, you would have no grounds to object.”

“None, sir.” She peered right into the **Commander-in-Chief**’s eyes. “But if you are going to fortify **Fleet 1**, I have one piece of advice.”

“Speak it.”

“You ought to substitute that fleet’s **Commander-in-Chief**.”

“Have you some qualms with Ms. Penezh?” *Dusanh* always referred to **Commander-in-Chief** of **Fleet 1**, **Commodore** Sporr, by her given name.

“Including all of the ships already under her command, she’d be at the head of twenty-five **sub-fleets**. That’s not including the **supply sub-fleet**. I have no reservations as to **Commodore** Sporr’s competence, but that number of ships is disproportionate to her **rank**. The formation should go to a **grand commodore...**”

“If you have no reservations as to her competence, then we should keep things as is. Besides, if we substitute that fleet’s command center for another, the work will only pile even higher for you and your subordinates.”

“I’m grateful you’re thinking of us, but the command center for **Fleet 1** is bordering on understaffed as is.”

“I’m sure it’ll work out. Twelve sub-fleets is not essentially different from twenty-five.”

“**Your Highness**,” she addressed him formally.

“What is it?” *Dusanh* raised his guard. It was never a good sign when his **Chief of Staff** turned unnaturally humble.

“Going by recent events with both **Commodore Biboth** and **Commodore Sporr**, does **Your Highness**, by any chance, harbor special sentiments towards *crofaicec* (founding-clan nobility)?” It was less a friendly query, and more a cross-examination.

“There are things you just don’t say,” said *Dusanh*, who was beginning to take offense. “Even if, hypothetically speaking, I put too much faith in the abilities of **founding-clan nobles**, would I then go on to appoint the head of the Sporr clan to such an important post, just out of some kind of affection for the highborn?”

Kenesh blinked. “I suppose that’s true.”

Throughout the history of the **Empire**, the Abliars and the Sporr had never gotten along. It was practically a tradition. Some even believed they engraved a hatred for the rival clan into the genes of their forebears.

“Have I convinced you that my proclivities are not so degenerate after all? Having Ms. Penezh hold the reins is the most logical approach. That is the sole reason. And I’ll bet you that Ms. Penezh herself won’t be too pleased by her role.”

“Yes, sir,” Kenesh nodded reluctantly.

“Good, so you understand. Please summon Ms. Penezh.”

“Roger.”

The flagship of Fleet 1, the *Lachcaü*, had already entered the Darmap Star System. It was possible to send instant communications via electromagnetic waves. Technically the transmission wasn’t “instant,” as due to distance there was a 0.1 second lag, but it proved no impediment to a conversation.

They were left waiting for around 10 minutes before Sporr appeared as a hologram. Her usually braided, blazing blue hair was hanging down.

“Why hello, Ms. Penezh. Have you changed your hairstyle?” *Dusanh* was somewhat taken aback.

“No,” she answered indignantly. “I was just about to get some rest, **Your**

Highness.”

“Allow me to apologize,” he said, though inwardly he was chuckling.

“There’s no need. A summons from **Your Highness** is a great joy, no matter the hour,” she replied, without even attempting to hide her annoyed expression. “So then, how may I be of service?”

Dusanh concisely relayed how he’d be fortifying **Fleet 1**, and the reasoning behind it.

“I see.” Sporr pondered to herself for a moment, a sight he thought uncharacteristic. “So there’s a possibility that my fleet engages with the patrol ship corps of the enemy head-on. And the enemy will still have the advantage.”

If the enemy employed the same tactic and concentrated their patrol ships together, it would likely surpass **Fleet 1** in scale. And if that came to bear, *Dusanh* wanted Sporr’s fleet to weather the brunt of the attack.

“I cannot deny that possibility.”

“And I’d thought the duty of my adorable little warships was to trample the enemy while they were exhausted.”

“Whether that becomes your duty depends on how the enemy comes at us.”

“Opposing patrol ship corps smashing each other to bits seems a mite uncivilized. Depending on the strategy of Command, can we avoid such savagery?”

“We will try our hardest. But I am choosing a battle won through savagery over a battle lost fighting elegantly.”

“So you’re entrusting me with the most Abliar-suited task.” For a brief moment, her eyes wandered, but the next instant, she looked into *Dusanh*’s eyes with purpose. “**Your Highness** can be quite nasty. Adieu.” She saluted, and her hologram disappeared.

Yet another unresolvable problem to add to the list. He turned toward Kenesh, who stood close by.

“When Ms. Penezh called me ‘nasty,’” he said, looking up at the **Chief of Staff**’s face. “Should I interpret that as a compliment?”

“Don’t ask me,” she said, squaring up her shoulders. It seemed she was intent on showing a total lack of willingness to get wrapped up in this particular dilemma.

Meanwhile, over at the Commander’s Bridge of the flagship of Fleet 1, the patrol ship *Lachcaü*, Sporr was lightly biting the joints of her pinky with a frown.

“Whenever I speak to **His Highness**, I always get out of sorts.”

Cfadiss was there to listen to her whinging. *You get out of sorts?*

“Abliars are supposed to be overserious,” she grumbled. “But that man has no self-awareness. There’s no point trying to tease him!”

“Might it be because the **Imperial Family** *wasn’t* born solely to be the targets of Sporr ridicule?” Cfadiss suggested reservedly.

“My, **Chief of Staff**,” she said, surprised to her core. “It never even crossed my mind it could be otherwise.”

Chapter 7: *Raicporhoth* (Defensive Warfare)

“Six hours until enemy fleet infiltration ETA. All ships, lift off.”

The order from the **Defensive Fleet Command Center** could only signify that the decisive battle was fast approaching.

“Detach the the link-pipe,” Lafier ordered.

“Detaching the link-pipe,” said Samson, working his controls.

And so the link-pipes connecting the ships of **Assault Unit 1** were tossed away.

“Igniting **main engines**.”

The **assault ship** *Basrogrh* began to stir.

“Lifting off.” Lafier moved her hand equipped with the **control gauntlet** slightly, and the ship advanced at a modest pace. They were not yet in position.

The **portal** had almost no gravitational pull, so even though they’d surrounded the **Aptic Portal**, they needed to maintain balance against Aptic III’s gravity and centrifugal force. Since they had to keep the engines revved in order to be at their assigned spot relative to the Aptic Portal, going too fast would be a waste of **propellant**.

For the time being, the *Basrogrh* locked into the same orbit as the **Aptic Portal**, and stopped accelerating.

“All hands released from their shifts,” said Lafier. “Each individual is to rest or eat in accordance with the shift diagram.”

The **starpilots** saluted and left. Staying on duty on the bridge was an obligation laid only on **Flight Branch Starpilots**. They were the ones who had to pilot the ships during an emergency, whereas starpilots of the other branches had no role and couldn’t help.

Lafier’s lonely shift would last for an hour and a half. After a three hours’ break, they would return to all hands on duty, in anticipation of combat.

Yet Jint remained alongside her.

“**Captain**, would you like a beverage?” he asked stiffly.

“Sure, I’ll take something to drink,” she nodded.

“If you want to be alone, just say the word. I don’t want to cramp your style.”

“Stay if you wish to stay. I’m not bothered either way.”

She was a tad heartened by the prospect, but she had successfully refrained from seeming so. Or so she intended.

Lafier didn’t need to specify her order; Jint knew to get her her **peach juice** with lemon on top. He got himself his cold coffee while he was at it.

“Could you pull up video of the outside?”

“Sure.” Lafier did so.

Star Forces ships hovered in all directions — in front, in back, up, down, and to each side. There were so many that it was difficult to make out the phosphorescent glow of the **Aptic Portal** lying in front.

“I could never have guessed I’d ever see such a spectacle with my own eyes, when I was a kid,” he said, deeply moved.

“I knew I would. I was obligated from birth to enter the **Star Forces**. I knew I’d have to set foot on a battlefield at some point. I didn’t think I’d have to do so as an **assault ship captain**, however. I wanted to enter the fray wearing the **twin-winged** circlet of a **commodore**.”

“You’ve got your whole future ahead of you. I’m sure that chance will come, in time.”

“You know,” realized Lafier, “I’ve never asked you what you wanted to do when you were younger.”

Jint could only shrug. “I was ten years old by the standard calendar when the **Empire** showed up. So, probably too young to have spared any thought to a clear plan for the future. All I know for sure is that I never even dreamed I’d be going to space.”

“Interesting. You had many options available to you, then.”

“Kind of, yeah. Though actually, that planet wasn’t really bursting with opportunity. Oh, I just remembered. I think I wanted to become a mine supervisor, since I heard tell of my mother having worked as one before she died. Not that I knew what that job entailed, mind you.”

“What kind of occupation is it?”

“Haven’t a clue, honestly, even now. But it’s not like I can be a mine supervisor anymore, so even if I did know, it’d do nobody any good.”

“What’s it like,” she asked, “not knowing what you’ll be when you grow up?”

“Anxiety-inducing, I guess,” said Jint. “You could get stuck with a boring job to pay the bills, or you could discover that your dream job is just as boring. To tell you the truth, I hadn’t given it that much thought when I was ten. I do remember feeling relieved when it was decided that I’d be an **imperial noble**. I hadn’t blazed that path myself, but it was a path to follow nonetheless.”

“Then I’m glad. No matter whether the path laid out for me led to worthwhile work or boring drudgery, at least I have no choice but to aim to be **Empress**.”

“I figured you might want to be a ‘**Your Majesty**.’”

“I don’t particularly *want* to be Empress. In fact, I’d rather ride on a mercantile ship. But I must at least try to aim for the **Jade Throne**. It’s the duty of all those born to the clan — the clan occupation. Besides, I can always indulge in trade after abdicating.”

“The clan occupation, huh... Sometimes, your people’s way of life sounds awfully simple.”

“You’re an Abh, too, Jint.” She wasn’t sure if he was praising or denigrating their way of life by calling it “simple,” so she stopped at pointing that out.

“Yeah, yeah, Lafier, I know.” He changed the subject. “If this strategy succeeds, then the **Countdom of Hyde** getting reconquered by the **Empire** won’t be too far off.”

“What will you do once you recover your **star-fief**?”

“What *will* I do?” Jint looked at a loss. “To tell the truth, it would be tough meeting with the people back home. I’d rather have somebody stand in for me

if at all possible. To be the '**Count**' for me."

"You should hire a **magistrate**."

"I should... but then, it feels like I'm just running away. Even though I don't even have a reason."

"You have a great reason, if you're working in the military."

"Oh yeah. I guess since I've still got 10 years of military service left, I can't be called the real and true count of the system," he said. Then his eyes virtually sparkled; a wonderful idea had occurred to him. "Why don't we trade **fiefs**? You become the **Countess of Hyde**, and I can plant roses as the **Viscount of Parhynh**."

The notion came as a shock to her. "There's no way that would be an option."

"So it's a no-go," he said, without a trace of actual disappointment. "And I thought it was such a good idea, too. Though I'll grant you, the **title** of '**Viscount of the Land of Roses**' doesn't exactly fit me to a tee, either."

"You'd best resign yourself. A **noble rank** comes with duties."

"If I ever meet a taker, I'd give them my noble rank free of charge."

"The **countship** belongs to your family house. You can't just give it to someone."

"Good grief. So it's attached to the noble house of Lynn, you say. The family house that currently consists of me. If only I had some cousin to foist it on."

"You can either stay in the **Star Forces**, or ride a trade ship. If you don't like the idea of withdrawing to your fief, you'd be far from the only **grandee** doing likewise."

"That so? Then I might as well do that." His expression turned sunny enough, but only for a fleeting moment before it took a turn for the stiff. "But then the folks back home will mock me as a coward."

"Every choice has its upsides and downsides. It is you who must decide," Lafier fired back.

"Thanks for the thought-provoking remarks. I'd been under the impression

that becoming an **Abh noble** meant your life became set in stone, but it seems rather enjoyable, all things considered.”

“**Nobles** need to enjoy themselves from time to time, too.” Lafier clasped her hands behind her head. “We Abhs haven’t truly matured until we’ve experienced three separate periods in life. You and I both have just begun to step into the first. And there’s no point in worrying our heads over the next.”

“I’m not really ‘worrying my head’ over it.” But something had him so taken aback he was knitting his brow. “That aside, what’s this about *three* life periods? I can guess the first two. The first is as a **starpilot**, and the other is as a trader. But what’s the third?”

“You don’t know?” Though he wasn’t as bad now as he had been three years ago, his ignorance still startled her at times.

“No, I don’t.”

“It’s the most important of them all.”

“Would you tell me already?”

“It’s your life as a parent.”

The first to assume their positions were the unliving, unfeeling **mobile space-time mines**. The **battle-line ships** had crept close to the **Aptic Portal**, and all at once unleashed the many, many **mines** they had stockpiled. The mines, thus fired, reached their assigned positions via inertia, and then stayed in place by briefly engaging the reverse thrusters. For a momentary span, they fell asleep, with the weak and light attitude-control **propulsor flames** they intermittently spouted akin to soft snoring.

The battle-line ships, now significantly lighter, subsequently retreated, after which the assault ships came flocking, their **antiproton cannons** pointed squarely at the **Aptic Portal**. The **defense ships** wedged their hedgehog-like frames in between the assault ships, and wriggled the mobile laser cannons equipped onto their surfaces. Lastly, the **patrol ships** slowly and gently assumed their places.

“Battle preparations complete. Thirty minutes until enemy fleet infiltration

ETA.”

After hearing the report from his staff, the Commander-in-Chief of the Aptic Defensive Fleet, Neleth, looked down at the **planar space map**. Naturally, he couldn't see through to **planar space** from here in **3-space**. That said, countless **carrycrafts** entered and emerged from the **Aptic Portal**, sending fresh new information all the while.

The enemy had largely divided their forces into diamond-shaped formations, and they were making a beeline for the **Aptic Portal**. Meanwhile, at the *Saudec Darmaper* (Darmap Portal), much farther out than the enemy, their allied, principal fleet could be seen.

“It appears as though we ought to make them hold out for five hours,” said Neleth, optimistic.

“But the enemy knows that,” whispered Nefeh close by. “They’ll come at us so ferociously they’ll be all but breathing fire.”

“Well, if they didn’t, what fun would it be?”

“We’re not waging war for your kicks,” Nefeh chided.

“Yes, but if I end up having some fun, then who can blame me?”

“Are you sure no one would blame you?” The **Chief of Staff** gave his genetically identical brother a skeptical look.

“Of course not. I’d never skew the battle for my own amusement, not with the lives of my subordinates on the line. In case that’s what’s got you so perturbed.”

“Yes, that’s what I’m worried about, obviously. I hope you don’t forget what you just said. Not just for our subordinates’ lives, but also not to lower the reputation of our clan any further.” After a moment’s thought, Nefeh corrected himself. “Or maybe I should say, in order not to *raise* it any further.”

“Don’t fret. I have nothing to do with the ‘florid insanity’ of the *Biboth* clan. Whenever I think about how I’ll be continuing my life of utter banality, I grin from ear to ear.”

“Commanding a fleet while holding the **title** of **commodore** is a life of utter

banality?” Nefeh scoffed. “That misconceived perception could be taken as a sign of our clan’s chronic affliction, and we can’t have that.”

“Then take care not to make me any more anxious,” said Neleth, peering at his brother’s face. “My urge to add yet another anecdote to the history of the madness of the *Biboths* has grown by the minute.”

“It’s okay. I’ll be here for you. That is to say, I’ll be here to stab you so as to stop that from happening.”

“A transmission from the **carrycraft** *Causrurh*,” interrupted the **communications staff officer**. “The enemy has dispersed **space-time bubbles** thought to be **mines**.”

“Tsk. So they’ve seized the first move while we’re here flapping our gums,” said Neleth.

Incorporating the new intelligence, countless blips of light appeared in front of the enemy fleet on the **planar space map**.

“What’s their ETA?”

“Seven minutes.”

“Shall we launch our own volley to intercept?” asked Nefeh.

“We have no other choice. Otherwise, we’d just be sitting here getting blown to bits, and that’d really ruin my mood.”

“That is a wise stance on the matter, Neleth.”

“Thanks.” He looked at the **Communications Officer**. “We’re shooting all of our **mines** at the **portal**. Notify the fleet.”

Lafier grasped the situation through her *frocragh*, though they also had the video of the outside pulled up, too. Vision boasted advantages that were different from those of spatio-sensory perception, and chief among them was color.

In front of them, the **mines** were huddled shoulder to shoulder. And then, that herd of bombs heated up; their **propulsor flames** had spouted.

“And so it begins...” she heard Samson mutter.

Lafier’s eyes darted to the war situation bulletin. It seemed there was still some time before the enemy fleet itself stormed through.

The **mines** plunged one after the other into the **portal**. Though moments earlier, the mines had made such a dense blanket that the **Aptic Portal** was almost entirely concealed, once they were all gone, it left Lafier with the sense that they’d been rendered defenseless. *But we were always defenseless to begin with.*

She bottled up her emotions. It mattered not whether there were **mines** out in front of them; it didn’t change the fact that an assault ships’ armor was thin. And they had no way of knowing what was happening over on the **planar space** side, either. They could only speculate.

There was no doubt that their **mines** and the enemy’s were violently smashing into each other. And it was impossible that they’d destroy every one of the enemy’s mines. A portion would certainly make their way out of the portal.

Time stretched languidly as they waited. Her eyes fell on her **control gauntlet**-equipped left hand. Twenty people’s lives were hanging on her fingertips. Pre-battle nerves enveloped her. The sensation wasn’t unpleasant, per se, but if it grew in excess, then it could well lead to her demise.

Surreptitiously, so the **starpilots** on the **bridge** wouldn’t notice, she took a deep breath to steel herself.

“The ETA of the enemy’s vanguard wave of mines is at hand,” said Sobash.

That very instant, the **Aptic Portal** began seething, with **mines** bubbling up from its surface. It was like a sickening cancer, with “cells” dividing from the portal and wildly multiplying in number.

“**Commence battle!**” But Lafier’s words of command might have been directed more toward herself.

A **mine** charged at them from dead ahead. Lafier made to line it up with the **antiproton cannon**’s sights and pull the trigger, but that second, the **mine** broke apart before her eyes. She thought a consort ship had perhaps taken care of it,

but it soon became clear that that wasn't the case.

The mine's *shards* were accelerating. This could only be a multi-warhead-type **mine**. Moreover, each of its warheads had propelling force behind it.

Lafier gritted her teeth and pulled the trigger. One of the warheads was extinguished. The consort ships, for their parts, were also carrying out their task. And so each of the warheads were blown into *actual* "shards" this time.

This shrapnel, too, posed a threat to assault ships, since they were so small and thinly armored. And since their relative velocity was so high, if they collided with one or more fragments, it could cause fatal damage.

Lafier swerved to evade one such shard which was on the larger side, and which just so happened to be on a trajectory to cross paths with them. That slight loss of time efficiency was all it took for another warhead to sneak toward them. When she noticed, it was directly abeam the ship. She had no time to point the bow toward it.

"Ecryua!" she shouted, warning the **Deputy Starpilot**, who was manning the multi-turret laser cannons.

But she needn't have. For by the time Lafier called Ecryua's name, the *Basrogrh*'s mobile laser cannon had already skewered the warhead with its ray. The matter-antimatter annihilation explosion boomed at close quarters.

"Starboard armor plating damaged. Breaches in Compartments 4, 11, and 15," reported Jint. "Oh, and in Compartment 7, too."

"Any casualties?" asked Lafier.

"Everyone's fine at the moment." Jint monitored the statuses of each individual non-bridge personnel crewmember, or in other words, all of the **NCCs**. Since they were now in combat, the NCCs should all be wearing their pressure suits.

Lafier breathed a sigh of relief.

"Hull temperature rising," said Samson. "But no need to worry on that account, either. It'll settle down in no time."

The antiprotons once housed within the warhead were reacting with the

atoms that made up the ship's hull. However, the majority of them had been deflected by their **magnetic shield**.

"Is the *Basrogrh* okay?" came Atosryua's voice.

Her hologram, around 10 *dagh* in height, was floating above one end of the **tactical control counter**. It was only showing her upper half.

"We can still push on," she told her transparent, miniature commander.

"Good." The hologram vanished.

The **Hecto-Commander** was both **Unit Commander** and the **Captain** of her ship she was piloting for the fight. She hadn't the time to talk for very long.

"Wave 2, incoming," said Ecryua.

Once again, Lafier focused on her *frocrach*. From behind them, **nuclear fusion shells** launched by the patrol ships were drawing nearer. Suddenly, they were already zipping past the *Basrogrh* in their bid to assail the **mines**. Lafier helped by taking down a **mine** before it separated into its multiple warheads, which served well to improve her mood.

The sector surrounding the **Aptic Portal** was now brimming with drifting shrapnel, and those glowing hot fragments, affected by Aptic III's greater gravity, were forming long lines around the **portal**. Perhaps these rings of debris would become a bit of a famous site for the planet.

"Wave 3, incoming," said Ecryua. They were numbering these "waves," but it didn't really mean much, seeing as the enemy **mines were** gushing out without pause. Their density was out of the ordinary, too. The **mines** they had had to deal with up until now were probably those that needed to weave between allied mines to reach them. Whereas the mines from this point forward would be hurtling their way with no obstruction to speak of. In other words, the fight would only get harsher from here on out.

Lafier pulled the trigger.

"How many **mines** did the enemy bring with them?" said Neleth, brow furrowed.

“I wonder whether they thought they’d bring all of those for a fight with the main forces.” Nefeh folded his arms. “Of course, even if they just planned to knock us down and stay to hold Aptic, they’d need **mines** left over for the job.”

“Should we give the enemy a pointer or two?”

“I’d be game to do so, if at all possible. Honestly, what is going through their heads?”

The enemy’s forces numbered an order of magnitude larger than their own. They’d had to steel themselves for an intense area-control projectile blitz. Yet the sheer fury was exceeding their expectations by light-years. Were they seriously aiming to pump the entirety of their stock of **mines** into the **Aptic Portal**? Surely, they *did* understand that the **Star Forces’** principal forces were approaching.

Neleth couldn’t wrap his head around it. “Well, whatever they’re scheming, we still just need to hold out. Let’s use the **patrol ships’ mines**.”

“Weren’t we going to save them for the *üéfthoth* (battle of pursuit), Neleth?”

“If we lose here, there will be no *üéfthoth*, Nefeh.”

“That is a startlingly cogent idea for you.”

“No, what’s startling is how you’re not raising some insane objection to the obviously correct move.”

“We can’t just stand here gaping in shock at each other.”

“I hate to admit it, but that we can agree on. Tell all **patrol ships** to begin firing back with their own mines.”

“By the way, what do we tell the **assault ships**? It’d pain me to keep exposing them to the enemy blitz like this.”

“Can’t be helped. If enemy **assault ships** start coming through, we’ll need the help they can provide.”

“But we need to do *something*.”

“Have them band together with the **defense ships**.”

“Huh?”

“Let’s pair each **assault unit** with a **defense unit**. We’ll leave the formation particulars to the *glagamh iadbyrer* (sub-fleet command centers).”

“Hmm... a sound approach.”

“I know it is. Now hurry — there’s no time.”

Nefeh was about to stride off to relay his orders, but he froze in his tracks without delay.

“What?” Neleth saw his twin’s eyes were fixed on the tide-of-battle diagram.

“It seems we’re a tad late, Neleth.”

Neleth turned to look at the diagram as well. The assault ships positioned around the **portal** had dropped drastically in number, such that significant gaps pockmarked the grid.

“It can’t be. What in the starry skies is happening?”

“It’s their new weapon,” reported **communications staff officer**, after consolidating all of the fleet information.

“New weapon?” Neleth frowned. “You find a new calling as a comedian?”

But the **staff officer** was not, in fact, practicing a joke routine.

Innumerable shards of debris drifted in the *Basrogrh*’s vicinity. At this density, it was a strenuous feat just avoiding collision. And Lafier was expending her every effort weaving between all of the obstacles, large and small. At present, all she could do was pull the trigger whenever the bow happened to align with a target.

Another shard, not far from rear starboard. Actually, it was too *regular in shape* to be called a “shard,” but naturally, that fact didn’t cross Lafier’s mind. Even if she were to have paid it any attention, she would have thought of it as another nonfunctioning warhead whose control unit or propulsion unit had been shot clean through.

And now, the “shard” / “nonfunctioning” warhead had sprung back to life.

“Ecryua; 4-7!” Lafier directed, quickly and loosely.

The warhead that had been playing dead soared straight at them like an arrow. But the trigger finger of the silent **Deputy Starpilot** made it in time, albeit by a hair's breadth.

The warhead blew up at close range, and a sudden storm of antimatter rained upon the *Basrogrh*. The **magnetic shield** deflected half of the downpour, but couldn't fend off all of it.

The *Basrogrh* rocked viciously, and the artificial gravity failed to absorb the resulting tremors.

"Fissures to the stern!" Samson announced.

But Lafier couldn't waste a second of concentration, not even on such a grave report... because that wasn't the only warhead awakening from hibernation. Three others in the *Basrogrh*'s immediate area leapt from the grave at the same time, and launched simultaneously toward their quarry.

Lafier sharply pivoted course, and one of the warheads met its end against an antiproton torrent. Meanwhile, Ecryua's laser cannon spurted its rays, and consigned one of the warheads to oblivion, then another.

She's an excellent gunner, thought Lafier.

"The *Cidrogrh* has fallen!" shouted Sobash.

The fellow assault ship that had been soaring to the *Basrogrh*'s port side now lay with its hull sliced in twain. The **antimatter fuel** must have leaked from the perforated section, as the *Cidrogrh* had been rendered a swelling lump of plasma instantaneously.

There was no surviving that. The face of **Captain Béïcarh** flashed through Lafier's mind. She bit her lip. *In the end, he never even survived long enough to keep worrying what people thought of his skills.*

Yet she had no time to waste mourning or pitying him. The formerly sleeping warheads were still stirring to activity, one after the other.

"Ecryua, shoot anything that looks like a warhead, even if it's not accelerating."

"Yes," Ecryua nodded deeply. "But my hands are full with just the ones that

are accelerating.”

“I see. So that’s their ‘new weapon,’” groaned Neleth.

It was not particularly novel or revolutionary. If one searched through the catalog of weaponry from when the **Star Forces** battled exclusively in **3-space**, they’d be almost sure to find a similar contraption. In short, after the **mines** got blown to fragments, they’d sleep for a fixed amount of time before resurrecting to fling themselves at nearby targets. But that was the only way they differed from normal mines. And they were largely pointless in **planar space**. There were multi-warhead mobile space-time mines, but even if they played dead within the limited space of a **space-time bubble**, they’d just be sitting ducks for enemy fire, so they posed no real advantage. However, when used in a large-scale **3-space** battle, they proved a true nuisance.

“What do we do, Neleth?”

“How about some suggestions from *you*, Nefeh?” Even as he was trading choice words with his **Chief of Staff** of a twin, his brain was churning on all cylinders. “For the time being, let’s withdraw the **assault ships** and push forward the **defense ships**. Then tell the defense ships to take care of any and all objects they deem suspicious. Don’t have the assault ships withdraw too much. If and when the enemy ships arrive in force, it’ll be a nightmare for the defense ship corps this time around.”

“Got it. Yet another plan that’s perfectly average.”

“Your sweet praises are always a treat to hear. Another thing: can we consolidate the information accrued by all of our ships and uncover the records behind those enemy warheads?”

“What do you mean?” Nefeh frowned.

“We’ll look into whether each of the post-division warheads have been blown down yet. Then we’ll know that whichever ones haven’t been blown down and aren’t accelerating are in fact waiting in ambush. We can raise awareness against them. Can the **flagships’ compucrystals** perform that level of operation?”

“They’d end up processing vast amounts of data. It’s at least worth trying, though. I’ll confer with the officer in charge whether it’s possible. Anything else?”

“No. Please hurry.”

“Okay.” Nefeh ambled toward his subordinates, his **long robe** swishing in the air.

Neleth took a deep breath. He was aware how irate he was. *Enough with this game of forbearance! I feel like just taking the battle to **planar space** for a do-or-die showdown.* But Neleth shook his head. There would be no “do” — only “die.”

Neleth shuddered. *Am I falling prey to the “florid madness” of the Biboth clan?*

Thanks to the defense ships taking the front lines, things had gotten much less desperate.

Lafier was breathing hard; the *Basrogrh* had taken quite the beating. It was a miracle the propulsor engines and firearms were functioning without issue. And above all else, she thanked the stars there were no casualties among her crew.

“All ships are to retreat temporarily,” said Atosryua’s voice. “I received permission from **Squadron Command**.”

“**Unit Commander**, you can’t be serious,” Lafier objected despite herself. “My ship can still fight.”

“**Deca-Commander** Abliar.” Atosryua’s holographic face made a sour expression. “Please don’t speak such twaddle. If you weren’t in a condition to fight, you wouldn’t be in a condition to retreat. And your ship must be as beat up as everyone else’s. You need to withdraw for stopgap repairs. If your lust for battle isn’t sated, don’t worry. You will have to zip straight back to the field in no time at all.”

“...I understand.”

“That’s a relief. Anyone besides **Deca-Commander** Abliar have any

complaints? No, I take it. Now then, fall back at max battlefield acceleration. Route specifications will be sent.”

Lafier steered the bow away from the zone of war. When they were quite far removed, she noticed her right hand was shaking from the nervous tension. Try as she might, she could not quell the shaking through sheer willpower.

Look at me! How pitiful! She lashed out in anger at her own weakness of mind. Half of her wanted to restrain her right hand using her left, but sadly, that hand was currently tucked inside the **control gauntlet**.

She couldn’t think of any other way, so she ended up biting on her right wrist.

“How’s it taste?”

Embarrassed, Lafier looked up to find Jint’s probing expression, and the **glass** full of **peach juice** he was handing her.

“I thought you’d prefer it cold during times like these, so I prepared it chilled, but... perhaps you’re more in the mood for the blood of the living.”

“What sort of creature do you think I am!?” She took the glass with her right hand, which had stopped trembling.

“I mean, I figure you hardly need to be inhuman to feel like sucking blood from time to time. Not that I’ve ever felt the urge.”

“Well I haven’t, either.”

“Gotcha. So you *weren’t* blood-famished.”

“No, I was not!”

“Yeesh, with the shouting. Ever heard the saying ‘the lady doth protest too much’?”

“**Captain**,” said Samson, rising to his feet. “Forgive my rudeness, but may I receive your permission to have the **NCCs** take off their **pressure suits**? I believe we’ve left the danger zone for the time being, and working with those suits on is on the difficult side.”

“Oh, it slipped my notice. You have my permission.”

“Thank you kindly.”

“But what ‘rudeness’ was there to forgive?”

“Oh, just that I interrupted that exchange. Looked to me you were having fun.”

Chapter 8: The *Claith Sitonr* (Ties That Bind)

At this rate, I think we can just make it, thought *Dusanh* as he regarded the tide-of-battle diagram.

The **Aptic Portal** was under a tight encirclement, and there was no sign they'd fall any time soon.

The right flank, taken by the fleet of **Grand Commodore Cotponic**, was entering through the sector between Aptic and Miskehrr. That would cut off the enemy's rear. The left, taken by **Grand Commodore Lulaimh's** fleet, was hanging over the *Saudec Miscerer* (*Miscerec* Portal) much like an umbrella, and was advancing toward the **Aptic Portal** this very moment.

"I believe Miskehrr is in the clear now. Tell the **defensive fleet** to emerge from standby at once," he ordered Kenesh. "The moment they receive the directive, the *Raicporiac Miscerer* (Miskehrr Defensive Fleet) will become *Byrec Ceudana Rainibr* (Phantom Flame Fleet 17)."

"Roger that," Kenesh saluted.

The main fleet, commanded directly by *Dusanh*, was aimed straight for the **Aptic Portal**, with six smaller fleets following about. Those were the ad hoc task force corps, numbered 11 through 16, and they were indispensable since their size made them ideal for enacting commands with comparatively increased flexibility. Lastly, directly behind the main fleet lay the fortified **Fleet 1**.

Now that they'd closed the distance on the enemy to this extent, their "precursive-recon mission" had lost all meaning. In its present state, Fleet 1 was *Dusanh's* elite corps, his ace in the hole.

He sat upright in his **Commander-in-Chief's Seat**, but his eyes were as ever on the blip representing the **Aptic Portal**. *Mr. Dubeus's daughter is serving there, if I recall. I hear that young man, the Count of Hyde, is on the same ship, too. I'd like for them to survive. If they die for us here, it'll weigh on my conscience.*

A **repair ship** extended its retractable landing dock for the **assault ship** *Basrogrh* to touch down, and proceeded to replace its armor plating. Then, one of the **battle-line ships** that had been temporarily ordered to act as a propellant resupply ship refueled the *Basrogrh's bisæcec* (propellant tank). All the while, the busiest of the bunch was Samson, the **Inspector Supervisor**.

Nearly all of the **NCCs** on the *Basrogrh* were subordinates under his direct command. That made twelve out of the twenty crew on board — more than half. The ship didn't need that many workers to control the ship; rather, they formed a sort of supervisory department, there to perform inspections, maintenance, and repairs. And as such, they were always at their most occupied right after a battle.

Jint, as the **clerk**, was fairly busy himself. He had three **NCCs** under his command, in charge respectively of cooking, accounting, and combat medicine. The *Sach Cnéir* (Chef NCC)'s work tasks hadn't changed, and since they had happily avoided casualties, the *Sach Lialér* (Medic NCC) had nothing to do. But the *Sach Scérr* (Accounting NCC) and their boss had to check what consumables and parts they needed to restock, in addition to the irksome clerical work on their desks. A military could never escape the laws and regulations that constituted a bureaucratic machine, and the **Star Forces** were no exception.

Compared to the rest, the three **Flight Branch starpilots** weren't busy at all. This was especially the case for **Senior Starpilot** Sobash, who hadn't even had much to do during the battle. His was the crucial task of manipulating the **space-time bubble**, but bubbles didn't usually factor into **3-space battles**. It was therefore quite reasonable of him to offer to momentarily handle the piloting and the issuing of commands the way that he did. He also suggested the **Captain** unwind; the battle clearly had her exhausted. She took his counsel, and ordered the **Deputy Starpilot** to likewise take a rest, as she was in all likelihood just as tired — though one couldn't tell from her expression.

On top of having been born a **royal princess** of the **Empire**, Lafier had learned and honed skills that were the envy of those who heard tell of her prodigious talents. One of those skills was the ability to sleep anywhere, at any time. Consequently, she was currently sleeping in her quarters. Heated combat was taking place a mere 50 *saidagh* away, but fortunately, space battles always

shifted phases in silence, so that was no obstacle to her shut-eye.

What did obstruct her sleep was not some explosion's rumbling, but a feline's forlorn mewling.

"Is that you, Dyaho?" Lafier lifted her head from her pillow, and looked in the sound's direction. A cat, on the other side of the ventilator.

Usually, there was no way a cat could enter the ventilation system, but now that Samson and his people had a fair few of the vent apertures open, she could see how he'd slipped through.

"I'll let you out right now, so wait for me there," said Lafier, sliding off her berth. Then she removed the grate.

Dyaho gracefully leapt to the floor, and licked his face; he appeared relieved now.

"You'd best not roam so far astray," Lafier lectured him. "If the crew ever has to evacuate, you might get left behind."

But Dyaho made no indication he understood her kind words of warning.

"Of course, it would behoove us to avoid that situation altogether," she continued, giving him a scratch. "Do you think I can handle this ship until this fight ends?"

Dyaho's purr was sopping with faith in her.

"Well now," she beamed, but the next moment, his owner cast a shadow over the cat's face. "Somehow, I can't trust your opinion."

"So now we're short on **fusion warheads**?" said Neleth, holding his head.

"Never thought we'd see the day we ran out of ammo," said Nefeh nonchalantly.

The waves and waves of enemy **mines** were so relentless that the **EM cannons** of **patrol ships** were needed to destroy them. And because of that, the **fusion warheads** that were those cannons' bullets were almost all gone before the enemy ships had even showed themselves.

“What do we do? Got any ideas?” asked Neleth, turning to look at his **Chief of Staff**.

“I suppose we’ll simply have to reserve the rest for later.”

“So you want to order them to hold back on their rounds? Think of the humiliation.”

“Losing **patrol ships** due to lack of ammo is even more humiliating, don’t you agree?”

“I know. From here on out, they are forbidden to use **EM cannons** against the **mines**.”

“That’ll put more of a burden on the **defense ships**.”

“There’s just no other way. Once the enemy ships enter the fray, their role here will end anyway. That’s when they can get some well-earned rest.”

“True.” Nefeh scratched the tip of his nose, by all appearances staring vacantly, but that was just him engaged in thought, in his own unique manner.

“**Commander-in-Chief!**” shouted the **Communications Officer**. “Multiple enemy ships are breaching through the **portal!**”

The battle was entering its next phase, but more than anything else, Neleth was relieved. “Have the **defense ships** retreat at once!”

“Took them long enough to run out of ammo themselves!” said Nefeh.

“Oh, they’re not out of ammo yet. They’ve still got **fusion warheads** aplenty.”

“I understand that, Neleth. But sometimes you just want to see the bright side. We’ve had precious little opportunity these past months and years.”

Neleth elected to ignore his brother’s reflections.

“The full-on brawl you’ve all been waiting for with bated breath is at hand!” Atosryua proclaimed. “I wager you’ve been sitting here angry, what with how we were thrown nothing but silly, tedious targets like **mines** and **patrol ships**. Well, we’ll now be fighting enemy **assault ships**. And if you fall behind, I’ll take it as a personal affront.”

Lafier took a deep breath to pacify her beating heart. She wondered whether the day would come where she'd be totally composed stepping into battle.

She focused her *frocragh*. Detritus was floating in uncountable amounts, same as before. Among the floating matter slept "dead" warheads as well, prone to spring on their prey. But using the information from the **flagship**, it was possible to tell which ones were the vengeful possums. Ecryua applied herself to the laser cannons, assiduously making sure they stayed dead.

Then, bigger beasts caught their attention. Several ships were approaching straight from around the **Aptic Portal** ahead, but these were not the enemy; they were the allied defense ships, now in retreat. The enemy came in the form of the assault ships chasing after the defense ship herds.

Assault Unit 1, currently reduced to a mere four ships, rushed between the defense ships and their pursuers. There were six vessels to contend with. No choice now but to struggle through the unfavorable two-ship gap.

"Concentrate fire on Ship 6," came Atosryua's command. The **lead assault ship Gamrorgh's compucrystals** had given the enemy ships identifying number tags. "Ship 6" was positioned at the tip of the left flank. "Reverse course upon flyby. We'll aim for Ship 1 next. Everyone got that?"

"Roger," Lafier replied concisely.

The four ships of Assault Unit 1 drew so close their sides were near to touching, and they each took aim. The enemy cottoned onto their intentions, and shifted formation, packing in tightly around Ship 6 at the center.

"Fiiireee!" Atosryua cried.

Lafier pulled the trigger. Four streams of antiprotons converged on the enemy assault ship and blew it up in the blink of an eye. In its place arose a dense, high-temperature clump of gas. The enemy ships then broke their huddle to avoid brushing with the clump.

But the Abh ships had no such compunctions, charging straight toward the clump's vicinity (with the *Basrogrh* the first to do so).

"Hull temperature rising drastically!" said Samson. "The armor plating may melt as it rises!"

“Then do something about it!” Lafier ordered haphazardly.

“Do something, she says...” muttered Samson, shaking his head. But he was nevertheless quick to grab the onboard comms transceiver and unleash a series of commands to his subordinates.

At that moment, Lafier activated the attitude control engines full throttle to change direction. The bow of the *Basrogrh* was now pointed at the stern of its target opponent, which was flying further and further away. At this distance, there wasn’t much hope of hitting the bull’s-eye, but Lafier attacked without hesitation. Seconds later, the enemy about-faced.

“Ho ho! Looks like they’re up for a fight. Let’s not go losing to them, team! The target is now Ship 1!” said Atosryua.

Both parties were revving their **main engines**, putting the pedal to the metal toward each other, but they hadn’t yet been able to overcome their inertia from before, so they were still, at present, gaining in distance. Lafier couldn’t help but recall the game she used to play as a child. It was a two-player, microgravity-room pastime, and the rules were simple. Each player held a pole in their right hand, and their left hands were tied to each other by an elastic band. They’d bend their knees, their soles touching, and then leap with all their might. After springing in opposite directions, the elastic band would stretch before reaching the elasticity limit and snapping them back. At first, they approached each other slowly, but always picking up in velocity, and by the time they met again they would be zooming at quite the speed. Whoever, in that instant, succeeded in disarming the other by striking away the pole out of their hands won the match. For reasons Lafier had never learned, this game was called *rīaic dorér* (horseback jousting).

Lafier didn’t understand the appeal of the game, but she felt as though she’d made a new discovery. *So this is what that game is based on.*

Very much as though the elastic band bind the two sides had stretched to its limit, the distance between them and the enemy stabilized for a brief moment before receding, at first slowly, then progressively faster. The enemy, too, was back in a huddled formation.

“We’re going to even out our numbers this time around,” said Atosryua. “And

if we fail to, we're running. Got it? If we don't end up having to flee, the next target is Ship 3."

Lafier nodded reflexively. The **Unit Commander's** plan was reasonable. The joust was always one-on-one, but this assault ship scuffle was not. Moreover, while it was true for any kind of battle that numbers mattered, numbers were almost everything in a head-on group clash. Earlier, by taking the first move, they'd successfully turned a four-on-six showdown into a four-on-five. Now that they were in a full-fledged firefight, four-on-five was on the verge of winnable.

The enemy drew nearer before their eyes.

"Fiiireee!"

Unconsciously gritting her teeth, Lafier fired an **antiproton cannon**. Through her *frocragh*, she could sense a part of the hull of an enemy ship fly off. At the same time, she could also sense the *Gamrogrh's* armor plating detach.

A mutual kill!? A chill ran down Lafier's spine.

"I'm all right," said Atosryua, much to her relief. "Change of plans — aim for Ship 1!"

The ferocious Abliar blood coursing through Lafier's veins delighted in the battle's continuation. They and the enemy both altered course, while Ship 1 retreated toward the **Aptic Portal**. It appeared as though that ship had sustained even more damage than they'd realized.

"Change of plans," said Atosryua; one could practically hear her licking her proverbial chops. "We're back to hunting Ship 3. I'm of the belief that in an even-numbers battle, the **Imperial Star Forces** cannot possibly lose, and all the more so for *my* unit!"

All the more so for my ship, Lafier amended her statement.

But in fact, neither side could destroy the other this go around. Lafier soon rallied the ship for clash number 4. The target was once again Ship 3, and once again, the distance between them and the enemy grew rapidly shorter. Lafier's trigger finger pulled back with a vengeance. At that moment, she realized that each one of the opposing ships' bows were pointed her way.

The blood rushed to her head. *Gunning after me now, are they!?*

“All hands, brace for impact!” she yelled, even as she revved the attitude control engines so as to slip sideways. Naturally, her finger never forgot to continue pulling that trigger, either.

Almost immediately, scorching heat ran across her *frocragh*. Her **circlet**, sensing a potential overload, temporarily shut off, cutting access to her out-of-ship spatio-sensory perception.

“Aughh!” Lafier tamped down her **circlet**-amplified *frocragh*, and luckily, the pain didn’t last for long. However, even after the **circlet**’s functionality returned, she still couldn’t sense what was going on outside. That could only mean that every one of the hull’s sensors had been fried.

Every kind of claxon was sounding simultaneously, and the **bridge** was dyed red by the lights indicating all the things gone amiss. The vessel rocked without pause, and informed them that serial explosions were transpiring somewhere aboard ship.

“Laser cannons down,” reported Ecryua.

“Hull temperature rising fiercely! At this rate she’ll melt for sure!” reported Samson, springing to his feet. Please, permission to dump armor plating!”

“Air sealing of Compartments 3 through 17 and Corridor 1, totally gone. Countless breaches. Likely three dead, five wounded. Explosions in Compartment 23, automatic extinguishing system not working. Temperature of Passage 3 rising.” Jint’s face looked grave: “This is pretty bad, Lafier!”

“Hurry and rescue the wounded!” Lafier had shaken her momentary stupor. “I authorize everything, **Supervisor**. Take action as you think best.”

“I appreciate it, but it’s hopeless,” he said, though that didn’t stop him from issuing orders left and right.

“**Deca-Commander** Abliar, what’s your ship’s status?” asked Atosryua.

Lafier scanned the other **starpilots**’ expressions, and bit her lip.

“I ask permission to break away, **Hecto-Commander**.”

“Permission granted, *Basrogrh*. A shame, but so it goes.”

“It really is a shame,” said Lafier, ending the transmission.

Owing to the sensors being out, she couldn’t grasp goings-on outside. So although she wanted to know how the enemy was faring, she had too many things she needed to attend to at present.

“**Supervisor**, can the ship be saved?” asked Lafier.

“I’m afraid not. It’s taking everything we’ve got just to postpone the inevitable. We could save the ship itself by cutting off the **antimatter fuel tanks**, but... we’d have to do it manually, and we don’t have any free hands... No! Another death!?” Samson’s fist pounded his **console**.

Lafier felt awful. She couldn’t help but regard every death as being on her. She had steeled herself for subordinates falling in the line of duty, but she didn’t expect that eventuality to be this heart-rending. This was even more upsetting than the fall of the *Gothelauth*.

Lafier’s shoulders drooped. “No other choice, I see. All hands evacuate!”

The **starpilots** got to their feet and saluted.

“I take it the **smallcraft** is undamaged?” asked Lafier.

“It should be, yes,” nodded Samson.

“**Senior Starpilot**,” Lafier addressed Sobash, “You are to prepare the **smallcraft** for liftoff at once. **Clerk**, see that the crew get there in time.”

Lafier then pressed the red **button** at one corner of her **control counter**, thereby sounding the evacuation **alarm**. The button she’d hoped she’d never have to press.

The horrible, ominous wailing reverberated throughout.

“This is your **Captain**,” she announced through the speakers. “All crew are to cease in their tasks. Abandon your posts immediately and make haste for the deck of the smallcraft.”

Having completed her announcement, Lafier stroked the **control counter**.

Forgive me, Basrogrh. Yours was a short existence.

“**Linewing Starpilot** Ecryua,” Jint addressed the **Deputy Starpilot**. “Can I leave

the cat to you? He's in my room, sitting tight inside his cage."

Ecryua shot Lafier a look asking permission, and when Lafier gave the nod, Ecryua and the cat's owner both nodded right back.

"Cool," said Jint, running out from the bridge with a **pressure helmet** in hand.

"I'm off to prepare the **smallcraft**," said Sobash, heading to the deck with his usual unruffled manner.

"Guess there's nothing else I can do from here," said Samson. "May I go help **Linewing** Lynn? My subordinates are the ones who're injured, after all."

"I told you: act as you think best."

"Oh yeah. Right then, I'll be back."

Lafier was now alone on the bridge. She took down the **ship's banner** and folded it. Then she took the **memchip** out of the **control counter**. This memchip contained all of the records from the completion of the assault ship *Basrogrh's* construction up to that very instant.

Suddenly, a violent impact. Lafier staggered. Someplace else on the ship must have succumbed to an explosion.

Well then. It appears we truly haven't any time to waste.

It wasn't that she'd doubted what Samson told her. It was just that, at that juncture, the reality of the situation dawned on her anew. She resolved to hurry herself to the smallcraft's deck. She put on pressure gloves and carried her **pressure helmet**. The **uniforms** of the **Star Forces** were air-sealed, so they could withstand exposure to the vacuum, if only for a brief while.

Right before exiting the door out of the bridge, she stopped in her tracks, turned around, and saluted the ship.

"You totally failed to hold them off at the pass, didn't you?" said Nefeh as he gazed at the tide-of-war diagram, arms folded.

"Don't say that so detachedly," Neleth sputtered. "You had a hand in the strategy."

“Calm down, Neleth. I know. This was *our* plan.”

“Besides, blame the enemy for acting so nonsensically. Who would’ve thought they’d chuck THAT many **mines** at us?”

It all stemmed from how the enemy’s mine blitz had greatly exceeded their estimations. Consequently, at this ship-on-ship phase of the battle, their combat lines had fallen apart. Now, the enemy units were breaching from the portal with ease, and aiming to cut up the defense network that was already riddled with holes.

The alarm rang as the floor of the **Commander’s Bridge** rumbled — the recoil from the **EM cannons**. The flagship *Scacaü* couldn’t afford not to participate in this fracas.

“The enemy’s lack of sense aside, what do we do now, Neleth? We couldn’t possibly *retreat*.”

“Of course not.”

It was only thanks to how the **Aptic Defensive fleet** was keeping the battlefield confined to the **portal** area that the enemy couldn’t spread out all of their forces. If they withdrew here and now, they’d just be giving the enemy the opportunity to assemble their optimal formations. The only advantage they had was the fact that only probability could dictate where on the **portal** any given ship emerging from **planar space** would pop out. As such, enemy ships directly following transposition were in a scattered state. That was the chink in the enemy’s armor that their numerically inferior forces could exploit.

At the cost of sacrificing ships every time they did exploit it.

They were, of course, inflicting more damage to the enemy than they themselves were taking. Yet the enemy ships were pouring out of the **portal** without interruption, like a gushing spring of copious water. Which would make the **Aptic Defensive Fleet** the dikes surrounding that upwelling. The earthwork was meager at best, but if they crumbled, the deluge would be devastating.

“Are we helpless to do anything but stand here stupidly while we get shot to shreds, Nefeh?”

“I’ve been expecting your madness to come up with something.”

“Sorry to disappoint, but I haven’t got any madness to help me,” said Neleth, his **commodore’s long robe** swishing as he made to take his leave from the bridge.

“Where are you going, Neleth?” Nefeh could hardly just ignore his leaving.

“To bathe.”

“To *bathe*?”

“Yes, to take a bath. Look at all this sweat. An extremely exhausted **Commander-in-Chief** is no good to anyone. Better to take a breather while I can, right? You ought to, too, when the time is right.”

“Well, you’re not completely off base, but... you do understand the situation, don’t you? This ship is engaged in combat, too. We could get blown down any second. Think of how utterly silly it would be to ‘die in battle’ in a bathtub. Sure, it’s necessary to rest, but you could at least keep it at a nap, couldn’t you?”

“It would be an indignity if my actions led to the needless deaths of my subordinates, but as for my own place to die, that I reserve the right to choose freely.”

“And the place you’ve chosen to die is a bathtub?”

On the way to the deck of the smallcraft, Lafier felt the artificial gravity vanishing. Since it occurred so suddenly, she ended up flying diagonally upward at high speed. Of course, for a race that lived in space like the Abh, a loss of gravity was nothing to panic over. Lafier thrust out her right hand and slapped it against the ceiling to move forward. Since this was faster than walking, she actually preferred this. On the other hand, she also knew this portended the ship’s forthcoming demise.

Next, the passageway’s lights went out. Lafier relied on her *frocragh* to continue down it. Sobash was waiting on the deck, while the smallcraft was glowing brilliantly, as though declaring itself alive within the dying assault ship.

“Is everybody aboard?” asked Lafier.

“**Linewing Starpilot** Lynn has yet to board.”

“What in the stars could he be doing?” she frowned, while noticing the spare **pressure helmet** in Sobash’s hand.

“*Üésach* (NCC Leader) *Pabhairyac* was wounded and got left behind, and I believe some accident must have befallen the starpilot after he went to rescue Paveryua. It seems his **pressure helmet** wasn’t working, and we can’t tell where he is or what’s happening. I think he’s most likely around Compartment 1,” said Sobash, with uncharacteristic difficulty. “That is, if he is alive.”

The **pressure helmet** had on it an emergency transmitter device, which informed the crew of everyone’s positions during crisis situations like what the *Basrogrh* was presently undergoing.

“And what of **NCC Leader** Paveryua?”

“The *Üésach* appears to have escaped via **lifeboat**.”

A **lifeboat** had no motive power; it was akin to a raft. While it had the requisite air-sealing, it could only support life for 24 hours, with precious little by way of rations and first aid implements loaded aboard in advance. Their primary advantage lay in how little space they took up; even an assault ship comfortably held dozens. Lifeboats were to be used when one or more crewmembers couldn’t make it to the smallcraft’s deck. However, escape via a **lifeboat** was the one experience the **soldiers** said they least wanted to go through. Paveryua must have been quite desperate, though that was understandable, given that the ship could blow at any moment.

“Roger that. I will go and save the **Clerk**. You pilot the **smallcraft** as the **Skipper**, and pick up the **NCC Leader**.”

“But...” Doubt colored Sobash’s eyes.

“**Captain’s** orders, **Senior Starpilot**,” said Lafier preemptively, snatching the spare **pressure helmet** from his hands and thrusting the **ship’s banner** and navigation log into them. “Take these and go.”

“I suppose I must,” said Sobash with a salute. “**Your Highness**, please note that I think you are a splendid **assault ship captain**.”

“You have my thanks,” said Lafier, saluting back. “Now then, see to the crew.”

“Of course. They are my subordinates as well.”

“**Captain!**” Samson’s head poked out of the smallcraft’s door. “There are only five minutes left! Though the whole thing could blow at any second before then! If you can’t find him in five minutes, please give up... as hard as it’ll be.”

“You heard the man,” nodded Sobash. “I hope you come out unscathed. I do not want to be called a **senior starpilot** who abandoned his **captain** during his first sortie.”

“But of course. I have no intention of dying in a place like this. Just retrieve our **lifeboats**.”

“Yes, without fail.”

What pissed Jint off the most was how he couldn’t pinpoint what exactly had put him in this mess to begin with.

He folded his arms and glared at the cracked **pressure helmet**.

He’d passed through Corridor 1 in search of the **NCC Leader**, though thanks to the NCC Leader’s signal, he’d been able to get an accurate picture of Paveryua’s position, with no fear of losing his way.

But the lion’s share of the corridor had become airless. The air-sealing bulkheads had dropped automatically, forcing Jint to open each one in turn to progress. And once one lifted, he had to close it again behind him. Otherwise, it would cause an inadvertent atmosphere leak, and while Paveryua was probably wearing a **pressure helmet** as proper, it seemed the **uniform** was torn, meaning Paveryua couldn’t survive for long in a vacuum.

It happened when he opened the bulkhead to Compartment 1. A blow not unlike a fist to the face struck him head-on. And because of the microgravity, Jint kept twirling backward, slamming against the corridor walls. Had there been more gravity, his neck might have snapped in the process.

He nearly passed out, but managed to regain his senses.

The hell was that?

After some thought, he made the following conjecture: *Some sort of debris*

must've been floating in the vacuum.

And when he'd opened the partition separating the compartment with some air left and the compartment without, the wind rushed through. Whatever debris had collided with him had ridden that current of air, and then, much to his misfortune, smacked against his **pressure helmet**.

Man though, that thing came at me fast.

Military-issue **pressure helmets** were tough and sturdy. It took a great deal of kinetic energy to crack one. Perhaps it wasn't just drifting in that space. Of course, no matter how he ended up like this, it didn't change the fact that his **pressure helmet** was now useless.

Life really is just a series of fortunate events, he thought. It seemed he was about to become a statistic. An accident like this was rare indeed.

From the bottom of his heart, Jint yearned for an average, unremarkable life, bereft of such stormy turns.

The *obætec* (transparent visor) of the **pressure helmet** usually displayed information imported from his **wristgear**, but now that too was offline. That said, he more or less knew the **NCC Leader**'s general position. If they hadn't moved, they were beyond the door before his eyes.

Jint opened the bulkhead. That compartment had higher air pressure, and so he was assailed by another blast of wind. He braced himself in case yet another stray object came flying for his head, but his worries were needless.

Guess bracing myself wasn't much use anyway.

"NCC Leader Paveryua! Where are you?"

No response.

The room wasn't very spacious. The air was hazy and various debris was floating, but if there was anybody else there, he'd know it.

Jint gave the zone a once-over, and noticed a red mist hovering in the background. Apparently, this was what a blood brume looked like.

He glanced over to where the mist was thickest, and spotted the **lifeboat** boarding aperture. Once a **lifeboat** was fired away, the partition separating the

boarding aperture door and the dead of space was lost. As such, in order to prevent some flustered individual from inadvertently opening it (and one could hardly refrain from being flustered if the time had come to use a lifeboat), an already-utilized boarding aperture would lock itself automatically and display the words DO NOT OPEN — the very words now adorning the boarding aperture.

There was nobody here, and there was no **lifeboat**. Two plus two.

“So that’s what happened,” Jint muttered to himself. *I do tend to rush in all heroic-like, only to end up with nothing to show for it. I knew it — I shouldn’t go doing stuff I’m not used to.*

Eyes bitter, Jint looked down at his cracked **pressure helmet**.

Maybe I ought to take my chances donning this thing and taking a dip in space.

It was cracked, but it wasn’t in pieces. It’d leak, sure, but that was better than nothing.

Jint crossed his legs in midair. In the end, he figured he just couldn’t muster the courage to entrust his life to a broken **pressure helmet**.

Instead of jumping into space here and now, Jint counted his circumstances on one hand.

No **lifeboat**. No **pressure helmet**.

At least 5,000 *saidagh* separated him from the nearest lifeboat boarding aperture.

The ship would blow at any moment...

Jint sighed. He recalled a nursery tale his grandmother had told him when he was a kid. In it, a genie offered to grant three wishes. If a genie were to appear before Jint this second, Jint firmly decided he’d ask for an ordinary life.

For the time being, there was one thing he could do. He could establish contact through his **wristgear**.

Hold on, would I just be dragging them to die with me? Jint hesitated.

If he asked for rescue, then somebody would come trying to save him. But the ship was ready to explode. There was the distinct possibility he'd end up killing somebody who would otherwise have made it out alive.

His hesitation lasted a mere moment, however. *I literally just learned I shouldn't do what I'm not used to. And I'm not used to dying a martyr.*

Has his **pressure helmet** been in full working order, he'd just need to speak into it and the **wristgear** would transmit his message, but now he was forced to remove a pressure glove to expose said wristgear.

Just as he put his right hand to that glove, the door suddenly started opening. Looking back on this moment with hindsight, it wouldn't have been unreasonable of him to regard that door with fear, but in the moment, he didn't register any such fear. All his heart could register was surprise.

His legs still crossed, Jint got tossed spinning through the air.

He could make out a person's figure beyond the partition. The figure was seemingly clutching the rim of the door so as to brace against the wind.

The instant he passed under them, Jint felt a dull pain in his chest, but he didn't mind a little discomfort. The real problem was how rapidly the surrounding air was thinning. It was turning unbearable.

Then, something was fitted onto his head with a reassuring CLICK. That instant, the air phial installed within this **pressure helmet** released fresh air. As always accompanied a sudden rise in air pressure, shrill noise attacked his ears.

After a number of deep breaths, Jint finally comprehended what had taken place. It was Lafier. She'd grabbed him with her legs, released her grip on the rim of the door, embraced his upper body as the wind blew their entangled bodies forward, and forcibly jammed the **pressure helmet** on.

"Are you okay, Jint?" Lafier's voice reverberated from within her own **pressure helmet**.

"I was okay up until you came along," he said, still dizzy from that tumult. "Now I'm not so sure."

"You blockhead. Would you rather I *didn't* come for you?"

“Don’t be silly. Thank you, Lafier. I’d be dead without you.”

“Hurry; there’s no time!”

Jint and Lafier began to fly down the microgravity corridor, side by side. Although, while Lafier was used to hurtling through microgravity space at a faster pace than walking, his floating was slightly awkward, forcing him to borrow her hand at times.

“Fate really seems to want to pair you with the vacuum of space,” she joked after the boarding aperture to the **lifeboat** came into view.

“Well, I need to tell Fate to cut it out. I don’t feel that way about space. **Landworlders** like me are rather sure the vacuum does a body harm. Probably just an old wives’ tale, though.”

“Before, you said something to the effect of, ‘if I died, who would be there to mourn me?’” Lafier suddenly changed the subject.

“Wha? Ah, right.” Jint harkened back to the conversation they had before the dinner banquet with Atosryua.

“I’d mourn you.” Her earnest, jet-black eyes stared at him through the **visor**. “Is that not enough?”

“So, was the water temperature to your liking?” Nefeh quipped, upon Neleth’s return to the Commander’s Bridge.

“More or less. Didn’t care for how the water would slosh out with every fusillade, though,” he replied coolheadedly. “In any case, has anything changed out there?”

“Oh, not much. Well, apart from the enemy beginning to withdraw. The main forces draw near, it would seem.”

“What did you say!? Why didn’t you tell me such huge news sooner!?”

“Ever since we were kids, you’ve always hated interruptions to bath time.”

“Interruptions without due cause, sure. But not for a report that important! I beg you, exercise at least that much better judgement.”

“I’ll try,” Nefeh shrugged. “But even if I had reported it to you sooner, what was there to do?”

“I’m the one who makes that call. Me, the **Commander-in-Chief**. And don’t think I’ll let you tread on my duty, brother or not.”

“‘Brother or not’? If anything, I think you treat me more harshly than you treat anybody.”

“Whatever, that doesn’t matter!” Neleth pulled the **command baton** out of his **waistsash**. “We’re transitioning to a pursuit battle as of this instant!”

“Ahh, I thought you’d say that,” said Nefeh, holding his head. “This is why I didn’t want to inform you.”

“What?”

“Our fleet is a wreck. If we give chase, we’d only be snatching defeat from the jaws of victory.”

Neleth was about to reply, but then he scanned the officers’ faces, which virtually screamed, *We’re catching another glimpse of that Biboth madness*. “Okay, Nefeh, you win this round.”

“There’s no round between us to win. In any case, we ought to rebuild, and hope the main forces clinch a victory for the Empire.”

Neleth drooped his shoulders. “Is that really all we can do?”

“What’re you saying? You must realize what a task this will be. Though of course, it’ll be us staff officers who do all of the work. Oh, speaking of which, Neleth...”

“What is it?”

“We won’t stop you if you want to go take another bath.”

Jint had been consoling himself that there was no way a **lifeboat** could be as bad as a Clasburian casket-rocket. And he was right — because it was quite a bit *less* comfortable.

The solid fuel burned for only the shortest of whiles, and thus the **lifeboat**

was ejected from the dying assault ship, reaching a **G-force level** of 20 in no time at all. Jint braced against the acceleration whiplash, cradling his knees on the basilar part of the vessel's accommodation space. The space's base was covered by an elastic material that took on his body weight. At max velocity, Jint was steeped in the material down to his lower back. He could almost swear he was hearing all of his bones creaking.

It was too dark to see, but he knew Lafier was in front of him, curled up to endure the massive gravitational forces, same as him. Once the acceleration was over, the material slowly reverted to its original flatness, Jint's body rising back up in the process.

In the pitch darkness, he flailed around before managing to center himself.

"Are you alive, Jint?"

By the time the words left her mouth, the base and the ceiling of the "accommodation space" (a cylinder measuring only around 500 *dagh* in height and 100 in diameter) were both gone. Its supposed maximum occupancy was five, but Jint had no idea how that many could really fit in quarters *this* cramped, especially upon launch, when even just the pair of them was more than pushing it.

"Still breathing, yeah." He swung his limbs, sure he'd gotten some bones broken, but no. He was fine. Then the space's lights turned on, leaving them to bask in their soft glow.

"Wow, it's suddenly gotten more livable than the casket-rocket," Jint said, heaving a sigh. There hadn't been any illumination in the rocket that fate had forced them to ride three years prior.

"But it'll only be livable for 24 hours."

"I'm sure Sobash'll come save us before a day passes."

"Of course he will!"

"What're you getting angry about?"

"I am not 'angry.'"

Now that her brain could sense she'd cleared any immediate danger, it

seemed she had some wrath to vent regarding the loss of her ship, and no other outlet to do so. Needless to say, she had been in better moods. Jint grinned.

“What’s so funny?” she said, furrowing her brow.

“Nothing, it’s just kind of *relieving* to see you fume like that. Wonder why?”

Lafier opened her mouth to snap back, when a tone like a bird’s chirping sounded, getting louder by the moment. The smallcraft come to rescue them was coming closer.

When the two crossed over, it was twelve minutes following the destruction of the *Basrogrh*.

Chapter 9: *Raïchacarh Üécr Sauder Apticer* (Battle at the Aptic Portal-Sea)

“Have they finally done us the favor of giving up?” sighed *Dusanh*, staring at the **planar space map**.

The enemy encircling the **Aptic Portal** was showing movement. By all appearances, they were seriously aiming to retake Aptic, and if they seized the **portal**, the **Star Forces** could but retreat. Even if *Dusanh* ordered a more offensive strategy, they would be at a daunting disadvantage, since they’d have to face an almost equal number of enemy ships holding the **portal**. But all of that was avoided thanks to **Commodore Biboth** hanging on to the last. Now, the enemy would have to bring the final battle to the **Aptic Portal-Sea**.

That being said, it was not as though the **Star Forces** possessed an overwhelming advantage, either. In all likelihood, the way that the battle to defend *Lacmhacarh* of three years prior ended would once again come to pass — a functional draw due to heavy losses on both sides. However, a “draw” would be a strategic loss for the **Empire**.

I’d really rather prevent that, thought *Dusanh*.

In his eyes, coming to a draw a second time would be unsightly to the utmost degree. After all, since its founding, the supreme directive of the **Star Forces** had been to annihilate all enemy fleets.

The Empire was attempting to push into the military cordon of the Three Nations Alliance from three directions: **Grand Commodore Cotponic’s Byrec Gona** (Fleet 4) from the left, **Grand Commodore Lecemh’s Byrec Mata** (Fleet 2) from the right, and *Dusanh’s* own *Byrec Bina* (Fleet 3) from the center. A compact and robust formation, ensuring that even if the enemy didn’t move toward them, it’d take less than an hour for the battle to begin.

Naturally, the fleets and ships of the Three Nations Alliance were not content to sit idly by.

“Oh, so that’s how you’re playing this...” A smile played across *Dusanh*’s lips as he witnessed the formation the enemy was currently assembling.

“What is it, **Your Highness**?” asked Kenesh.

“They’re *challenging* us, wouldn’t you agree?”

“No,” said Kenesh. “I think they’re just aiming for a frontal breakthrough.”

The enemy forces were clearly packing tighter together, without extending either flank.

“I see. A central breakthrough formation. If we let them past without incident, the damage would be minimal, that is true. We could even have the ships evacuate in the order they’re overtaken, avoid fighting altogether, and moreover, Aptic would become part and parcel of the **Empire**. Even Miskehrr would probably remain in our control.”

“Are those your orders?” said Kenesh, raising her eyebrows with a frown.

“Heavens no. I am an Abliar, you know. Having dispatched an armada of this size, how could I take pride in settling for one or two remote star systems? The enemy has left to us the decision of whether to settle things once and for all.”

“What if you’ve misread them?” asked the **Chief of Staff**, voice brimming with skepticism.

“Even if I am misreading them to an extent, they *have* given us the choice, that much is certain.” *Dusanh*’s eyes fixed onto Kenesh’s casually ravishing visage. “We will fight. Understood?”

“If I were to object, would I be dismissed on the spot?”

“Of course not. You are an irreplaceable **Chief of Staff**. How could I dismiss you? I would simply fail to take note of your opinion, that’s all.”

“I imagined as much,” nodded Kenesh. “So I don’t intend to dissent. It’s just as you’ve stated — we’ve come all this way in order to wipe out the enemy fleets.”

“Very good. Now, **Fleet 3** will maintain this formation. 2 and 4 will assume a close-together order, and attack the enemy from either the side or the rear. **Fleet 1** will fly in from the front. The task force corps will stand by at first, to be thrust into battle depending on how the enemy responds. It’s a rough plan, but

given the enemy has not yet completed their preparations, it's all we can project for now. Please look into whether this preliminary plan will work."

"Roger that," Kenesh saluted, and about-faced.

"Oh, before you go, there's something I'd like to ask you," he said, stopping her.

"What might that be?" She span back around, expression taut with tension.

"Which one was it?" said *Dusanh*, serious as ever. "Which one of them do you have history with? Mr. Nefeh, or Mr. Neleth?"

"**Commander-in-Chief**," Cfadiss reported, addressing Sporr, "**Fleet 1** has finished deploying."

"Well if that wasn't a job well done." Reclining in the baldachin-canopied **Commander's Seat** in a disheveled manner, the report that entered her ears did nothing to jolt her out of that palpable disinterest. It was clearer than crystal she was not *into* this particular battle.

"Ugh, how inelegant... how unrefined," she let slip. Her **Phantom Fleet 1** had spread out in front of **Fleet 3**, the main force, and now they and the enemy were headed toward each other. In nary ten minutes, they would engage.

At this short distance, the enemy's formation was all but evident. It was roughly oblong in shape, with its major axis facing this way. Along the outer circumference flew the patrol ships, protecting the other types of ships dotting the center. And it was **Fleet 1**'s mission to cut through that shell and lay bare the soft flesh within.

"This may come as a surprise, but I love picking on the weak." She moved only the crimson pupils in her slit eyes to regard her **Chief of Staff**. "Running over feeble little **assault ships** and **battle-line ships** is the beauty of a **recon sub-fleet**. Tell me you agree, **Chief of Staff**?"

"Well... I believe that to be a matter of preference," replied Cfadiss noncommittally.

"My word, **Chief of Staff**," said Sporr, innocent as a lass of four, "is there

anything in the galaxy more important than my personal preferences?”

*The **Commander-in-Chief** is joking.* Or so Cfadiss endeavored to believe.

“I say, a brute force brawl managing 25 **recon sub-fleets**. I might even have been able to swallow this if we far outnumbered them, but they’re the ones with the numbers advantage.”

“But **Commander-in-Chief**,” said Cfadiss, taking a shot at a rebuttal, “what would you say would be a viable alternative strategy in this situation?”

“If it were up to me, I’d avoid fighting altogether,” said Sporr. “I’d have the fleet part left and right to make them a getaway path. Then we’d focus on holding Aptic, while the enemy’s off building a strategic base by a nearby **portal**.”

“So you would make it a more protracted battle?”

“You bet I would. It’d be a great deal more elegant than a bunch of **patrol ships** blowing each other up.” She rested her chin in her hand, and looked up at her **Chief of Staff** inquisitively.

Again with the personal preferences, thought Cfadiss, but he kept that opinion to himself. “But wouldn’t that preclude any opportunity for a trample-blitz?” he asked, using the word for when patrol ships overrun smaller, weaker vessels.

“I’m not saying a protracted battle is *ideal*. I’m just saying it’d be better than this.”

“I see.” He now understood Sporr’s thoughts on the matter; in the end, it was just one opinion among many.

“Now then, I can hardly spend all of my time here complaining like this,” she said, concealing a small yawn using the back of one hand before rising from the **Commander’s Seat**. “**Chief of Staff**, tell all **sub-fleets** under my command to cut loose the supply squadrons and advance using only the recon squadrons. All vessels are to prepare for **3-space battle**. As for the **space-time bubbles**, I’m setting the standard for this engagement at half-squadron.”

“Yes, ma’am. If I may... half-squadron space-time bubbles?”

“That’s right. Nothing good will come if we’re overly hasty.”

“Roger.” It was true that as long as they were the underdogs, it would scarcely behoove them to have **Fleet 1** stick out on its own. All that would come of it was a needless waste of good patrol ships.

“Next — the primary mission of the *Creudadh*, the *Bircac*, the *Cengamh*, the *Gosirorh*, the *Fertunéc*, the *Saidauc*, and the *Tlaristoc* is to halt the advance of enemy ships.”

Cfadiss frowned. Each of the seven sub-fleets the **Commander-in-Chief** had listed off (without even glancing at the formation diagram) were positioned in the fleet’s rear.

“And the other **sub-fleets**?”

“I was getting to that.” Sporr’s eyebrows bristled crossly for a second. “The remaining **sub-fleets** are to penetrate the enemy lines, avoiding any engagements if possible. If the enemy comes asking them for a fight, they shouldn’t readily take them up on it. If unavoidable space-time fusion takes place, the ships in the bubble are to fight their way away and shift to the rear with all force. We’re going to pierce through the enemy’s line of patrol ship units and trample deep into their central formations.”

“I see, I see.” Cfadiss had gained a grasp of her strategy — it seemed she’d make this the trample-blitz she wanted, by any means necessary.

“The flagship space-time bubble’s forward march will be the signal to advance. Got all that?”

“Yes, ma’am. I will relay your words to our **sub-fleets** at once.” Cfadiss saluted, and Sporr nodded slightly in reply.

From the **space-time bubble** of Fleet 1’s flagship, the *Lachcaü*, emerged a number of **conveyance ships**, taking off to transmit her orders.

“It’s almost time.” Sporr folded her arms, having just heard tell of how the flagship of the *Saidauc*, the sub-fleet that was furthest out, had merged space-times with its conveyance ship once again. Her eyes were now glued to the **planar space map**.

“Tell all **captains** — shift space-time bubbles to complete mobile-state, course: 010.” Then she looked off to the side and let out a small little sigh. “My

heart's still not in it, though.”

Just as the **bubble** composed of the flagship *Lachcaü* and two other ships began moving forward, so too did **Fleet 1** start flying into activity.

“Allied ships have commenced **mine battle**,” reported the **Exploration Staff Officer**.

All at once, the battle-line ships of **Fleet 3** hurled their **mines** at the enemy.

“We can’t expect much from that,” muttered Sporr.

“Groups of bubbles thought to be defense ship units are starting to flee.”

The **bubbles** deployed at the front of the enemy military’s oval formation veered to the sides to allow **Fleet 1** passage. Allied **mines** used that opening to hurtle through.

Enemy patrol ships had **space-time bubbles** to themselves, but since **Fleet 1** had three ships to a bubble, the enemy underwent **space-time fusion** amongst themselves to match up. As a result, the mass of the bubbles on both sides became more or less equal as they closed the gap.

“Reaching enemy fleet vanguard in 10, 9, 8...” counted the exploration officer. “...2, 1, contact!”

On the **planar map**, the small oval representing **Fleet 1** kissed the bigger oval, and merged into one another as though they were themselves enormous **space-time bubbles**.

“This is the worst. I can almost *hear* the dreadful *scraping*,” said Sporr, her blazing blue eyebrows knitted in consternation. “It’s the sound of my adorable ships getting hurt. Of my precious subordinates dying. I don’t think I’ll *ever* take a liking for it.”

“I suppose we have no choice but to get used to it...” said Cfadiss, intending to soothe her.

“Yes. Yes, you’re quite on point, **Chief of Staff**,” she said, eyes still set on the **map**.

An enemy bubble was drawing closer to the **bubble** wrapping the *Lachcaü*. The allied vessel to the flagship’s rear left split off into a single-ship bubble, and

rushed in between, standing in the enemy's way. The enemy, never veering, **fused space-times** with that bubble, which meant it wasn't attacking the flagship.

Immediately after the **command squadron**, the recon sub-fleet that was protecting the flagship was none other than Sporr's old haunt, the *Ftunéc*.

Meanwhile, the **bubbles** placed at the outer edge of **Fleet 1** fused with enemy bubbles, thereby shedding their speed, and one by one fell away from the main formation. Thus, Fleet 1 was thinning, not unlike a melting block of ice. Yet they were steadily cutting their way into the enemy's nucleus, all while mini-battles raged within the **bubbles** that had drifted from the main engagement. The units that successfully won the intra-bubble skirmishes then left both the ruins of the enemy ships and wounded allied ships to form temporary single-ship bubbles. Then, following the orders of upper command, the single-ship bubbles merged into three-ship bubbles once more, and returned to the primary line of battle.

To infiltrate the center from the oval's rear — that was the mission. That was when the melting ice block would regain some of its former thickness. Of course, there were also bubbles where allied ships had been routed. Furthermore, those enemy ships that had triumphed in their mini-battles were also aiming to return to the warfront proper, but a concentrated attack from **Fleet 3's** battle-line and assault ships made that ambition a distant dream for most.

In order to gain the advantage, the enemy tried to drag in **bubbles** that were mid-combat, but because **Fleet 1** was forcibly infiltrating, that plan was going poorly. Such was the gap between the Three Nations Alliance, using their patrol ships defensively, and the **Star Forces**, using them offensively.

"We've broken through an enemy patrol ship unit!" shouted the **exploration staff officer**."

"Tell the **command squadron**, the *Ftunéc*, and the *Scnic*." For the first time this engagement, Sporr drew out her **command baton**. "All ships prepare for **mine battle**. Then, after all launched **mines** clear their time-space of origin, shift to single-ship bubbles."

She seems positively giddy, thought Cfadiss. Her earlier sullenness vanished,

like it was only ever a facade.

All at once, the **command squadron** and both recon sub-fleets unleashed their **mine** payloads. And the enemy was in visible disarray.

“Single-ship bubbles, assume complete mobile-state,” said Sporr, pointing toward the center of the enemy fleet using her **baton**. “Time for some trampling!”

“How very like Ms. Penezh,” said *Dusanh*, astonished. “She turned the battle into a trample-blitz by force. And her clan has the gall to call mine ‘crude.’ Other things aside, they’re rather *intemperate* when it comes to the art of war. In matters of combat, we Abliars are more subtle, more discerning.”

“But you can’t argue it’s not extremely effective,” said Kenesh.

“I ask that from now on, you refrain from singing the praises of the head of the Sporr clan anywhere within the ambit of my *frocragh*. It’d be less of a crime to decry a pet cat as a heinous villain than to praise a Sporr.”

“I’m not ‘singing her praises.’ I’m stating a fact. As we speak, the enemy is in disarray.”

“And so are allied ships,” *Dusanh* grumbled back at her, chastened.

Already, almost an hour had passed since **Fleet 1** made contact with the enemy. Sporr’s forces had successfully wrenched open the hard shell that was the enemy’s patrol ship units. And, supported by the “wing” flank to each side, the central recon sub-fleets were disrupting the enemy fleet’s center. The enemy, for their part, were less than thrilled by the prospect of doing nothing while getting trampled to oblivion; the outermost patrol ship units descended to the center, and set about trying to snap the spear now thrust into the heart of them — the spear called **Fleet 1**. However, in so doing, they served **Fleet 3** an opening to take advantage of.

This was not to say the **Star Forces** were in a particularly advantageous position. Smaller-scale tussles had broken out all over, and dozens of sectors saw both armies totally blending together into chaotic free-for-alls.

“How I thank the enemy for using up all of their **mines** earlier,” said *Dusanh*.

Ever since Aptic's encirclement, there had been a communications stoppage with the defensive fleet, but the sheer amount of **mines** the enemy had flung the fleet's way had been observed from afar.

"Perhaps they were that confident they could take Aptic," replied Kenesh.

Dusanh understood what Kenesh meant. After all, if the Aptic Star System fell to the enemy, and their forces became trapped there, whether or not they had any **mines** would be immaterial. Despite having seized Wimber and Aptic, the **Star Forces** would be forced to flee in dejection. And while the Abh were out planning their comeback, the enemy would enjoy plenty of time to replenish both **mines** and ships alike.

"And that's not all," said *Dusanh*. "They must have placed confidence in their new, **patrol ship**-heavy formations as well, likely under the impression that **battle-line ships** wouldn't be a concern."

"I could see that being the case," agreed Kenesh. But he assumed she was thinking that they could analyze these things at their leisure later.

As they conversed, *Dusanh's* line of sight danced and darted around the top section of the tide-of-battle diagram.

"I order the **assault sub-fleet** *Mudautec* to break away from the warfront post haste. They've taken too much damage," *Dusanh* told the **Communications Officer**. "Tell that to the *Caunasairh* and the *Garicochec* as well."

"This makes eleven **sub-fleets** we've had retreat, I believe," said Kenesh, grimacing. "I was prepared for the eventuality, but I can't help but note how dire things have gotten."

"It is dire," he replied perfunctorily, but inwardly, he was displeased — it was as though she was criticizing his leadership.

"I must say, **Your Highness**," said Kenesh, with an expression of glee the diametric opposite of *Dusanh's* chagrined mood, "you're doing a splendid job. Look how long we've held out despite inferior numbers."

"Thank you," said *Dusanh*, though he'd grown all the more disheartened by her pointed consolation. "Though once the two other fleets join the action, the situation will improve appreciably. What are those two doing, anyway?"

“Those two” referred to **Grand Commodore Lulaimh** of **Fleet 2**, and **Grand Commodore Cotponic** of **Fleet 4**. Due to distance issues, their fleets would arrive at the field of combat a little late. Fleet 2 was estimated to reach the battle fifty minutes from now, with Fleet 4 encountering the enemy a half hour after that. Both fleets were smaller in scale, and the both of them combined fell short of the size of **Fleet 3**, the fleet under *Dusanh*’s direct command. Yet in this current jumbled state of affairs, where allied and enemy ships were operating in near-complete confusion, the introduction of fleets with orderly formations would yield results to be reckoned with.

“What are they doing, you ask?” chided Kenesh. “I should think they’re advancing with all the speed the laws of physics allow them.”

“Sometimes I rather loathe those laws of physics,” he said candidly.

“**Your Highness**,” she chuckled, uncharacteristically. “As a loyal **Chief of Staff**, shall I do you the service of pretending I never heard those words escape your lips?”

“By all means,” he replied, with a disgruntled look. “I don’t know to whom, exactly, you are loyal, but if you could ignore my silly grouching, I’d be grateful.”

“Yes, sir,” she nodded, elated with her “triumph.”

Dusanh pretended not to notice her gloating grin, and pointed at the tide-of-war diagram with his **command baton**. “Let’s put *Byrec Ceutegona* (Fleet 14) over here. The ranks have seriously thinned in the area.”

“Roger that. I will deploy the **conveyance ships** at once.”

“Then, I want you to reorganize the **sub-fleets** that have fallen back toward the rear into formations with sufficient firepower.”

“We can’t make very many that way. All of those **sub-fleets** have sustained heavy losses.”

“I know, but even just one more sub-fleet makes a difference.”

“Yes, sir. No objections.”

“Now then, I’d like for you to waste no time — Ah, that’s not good.”

On a local level, the enemy was rallying, their sights set on extirpating a

handful of sub-fleets. *Dusanh* took a deep breath, so he could rattle off the names of all of the sub-fleets he'd have flee back to the rear.

"Have we gotten a bit ahead of ourselves?"

As Cfadiss watched the **Commander-in-Chief** gazing at the tide-of-war diagram, her head slightly tilted to the side, he was struck by a facet of Sporr he never thought he'd witness.

*So the **Commodore** is capable of self-reflection.*

At present, Fleet 1's command center could keep tabs on the **command squadron**, the two recon sub-fleets (the *Ftunéc* and the *Scnic*), and a ragtag assortment of squadrons. Within **planar space**, inter-vessel communications linkage was limited at best. Their options were to send out communications vessels as messengers, or to use space-time particles for **inter-bubble communication**. However, this "inter-bubble communication" method was short-range, and couldn't convey very much information. As such, if the ships under one's direction ever spread out too far, unified command would become impossible. Regardless, they could read the situation through all of the **mass-waves**.

Fleet 1 had entered the core of the enemy fleet, and was slowly passing through toward its rear. As for the units outside the command center's range of contact, they were either in single-ship bubbles treading all over enemy assault ships, or dodging fire trying to regroup with the **command squadron**.

"Maybe we should take a break...?" Sporr was sitting cozily in her **Commander's Seat**, and her upward glance at her **Chief of Staff** pleaded for his opinion.

"I believe that would be a wise decision, ma'am," he replied.

"It would, wouldn't it. Then let's not hesitate." Sporr leaned and rested her chin against the back of one hand. "Tell the captains to shift their **bubbles** to the stationary-state. But I'm granting each captain permission to flip back to the mobile-state if and when they deem it necessary due to incoming fire or whatever else."

“Roger.”

As viewed through the **planar space map**, **Fleet 1** was reminiscent of a bacterial nidus eating at the enemy fleet from the inside. And as Sporr’s patrol ships gathered back together, that focus of infection was swelling to greater and greater size. Sporr sat there silently, busy observing the current conditions. Naturally, Cfadiss’s eyes were pulled to the direction she was looking at: another mass was approaching by the second. **Phantom Flame Fleet 2**.

“**Fleet 2** has made contact with the enemy,” announced the **communications officer**.

“And that’s the end of our break,” Sporr declared. “Tell all captains — single-ship bubbles, **complete mobile-state**. Course: 270. Also, I want you continually signaling the message, ‘FOLLOW ME.’” Then she flashed the Chief of Staff a devilish smile. “Now we can have some fun picking on the weak!”

I won’t be having much fun, thought Cfadiss, but, with some effort, he swallowed those words down.

When Sporr lifted her chin, Cfadiss could tell she was about to say something, but he couldn’t stop the words from leaving her mouth; he could only endure it (which was the Abh way) by clenching his fists.

“Let’s finish those land swine and mud turtles off!”

“I suppose they’re finished now,” said *Dusanh*, stroking his chin.

“Most likely,” Kenesh concurred.

Not long after **Fleet 2**, **Fleet 4** locked horns with the enemy as well. The enemy fleet’s formation was no longer a solid oval, but more like a microbial blob wriggling in distress. The small-scale units breaking off the enemy fleet were pounced upon by Task Force Units 11 through 17, and many a bloodbath ensued.

At first, both sides’ forces had been roughly equal in might, with the enemy edging them out. But now, the **Star Forces** boasted the absolute advantage. Yet the enemy, who had seemingly been flying totally aimlessly, must have some sort of driving impetus behind it, for all of the enemy ships that had squeezed

past the **Star Forces** siege were aiming for a specific direction.

“Is the enemy planning to flee toward Wimber?” observed Kenesh. “Maybe they’re headed for the sector past Wimber.”

“If they do flee to Wimber, they’ll have my gratitude. And even if they retreat farther out than Wimber, that is still only good news. They would have to give up on a not inconsiderable number of ships.”

When the enemy misjudged the correct time to retreat was when our victory was decided, thought *Dusanh*.

Putting aside the unthinkable possibility of losing Aptic before the main forces arrived, if the enemy had instead fallen back to Wimber or some other place before the decisive battle, the **Star Forces** would still have had a bitter fight awaiting them.

Which is not to say, thought *Dusanh* with more than a hint of self-deprecation, *that this battle has not been bitter.*

“What do we do from here? If you could give us even just a rough course of action, it would help us immensely.”

“The second the enemy hides away in Wimber, we blockade them with **battle-line ships**. As such, please choose the **strike sub-fleets** for the task beforehand. Then, we’ll take Ne’oporr and Marskty, and add them to the list of securements alongside Aptic, Miskehrr, and Darmap.”

“So we’re to totally encircle the remaining enemy ships,” confirmed Kenesh, who looked very much in favor of this plan. Ne’oporr and Marskty were **portals** closer to the center of the Milky Way’s portal-belts, so if they took control of them, the enemy would become trapped in by five separate portals.

“Let’s have **Fleet 5** take over this task as soon as possible. That way the new ships can get in some familiarization training while also blockading the **Wimber Portal**.”

The one inhabited planet of the Wimber Star System, Wimber IV, was an agricultural planet. They had virtually no infrastructure for mending ships. Of course, the enemy fleet also contained repair ships, so it should come as no surprise that they could conduct temporary repairs, but they’d have no choice

but to let the more heavily damaged ships lie. Furthermore, they had no way to restock the ammunition they'd consumed, such as the mobile space-time mines, to say nothing of the **antimatter fuel**. So, sooner rather than later, they would need to choose between three unsavory options: surrender, disintegration, or suicide by one last sortie. In *Dusanh's* eyes, if the men and women of the enemy fleet turned in their swords for plowshares on that farm-filled **landworld**, that would be the best for everyone.

"If **Fleet 5** proves able to carry out this mission, then we will resume our strategy of barreling through the next star systems in our path. If we allot a whole month, will it be enough?"

"We would have to look into it, but it will probably take around that much time."

The remaining enemy ships were succeeding more and more in escaping.

"Kindly use only mines to attack the fleeing ships. It won't make much of a difference, but it's better than doing nothing. At this stage, the lives of our **soldiers** are no longer at stake.

"I concur," nodded Kenesh.

"Now there's only one major question to tackle."

"Which is?"

"With whom do you have history: Mr. Nefeh, or Mr. Neleth?"

"**Your Highness!**" She squared her shoulders and scowled at the **Crown Prince** of the **Empire**.

"Don't tell me..." he started, wading into frightening territory. "It can't be *both* of them, surely?"

Kenesh's death glare turned grimmer still.

"Or else..." *Dusanh* shivered at his own conjecture. "...Could it be you don't even know which of them it was?"

"**Your Highness**, I believe it's clear from my actions that I have dedicated half of my life to the **Star Forces**," she stated, her tone as gentle as her eyes weren't.

“If anyone doubts your loyalty and devotion, bring them to me and I’ll correct that notion,” he replied.

“Furthermore, I love and respect the Imperial Household.”

“I am pleased to hear that.”

“Therefore, it pains me to no end to have to say this to the **Imperial Admiral** of the Star Forces and **Crown Prince** of the Abh, but...”

“Say what?”

“PLEASE, SHUT UP ALREADY!”

Chapter 10: The *Donic Léhiacotr* (Ceremony of Surrender)

“Surrender? Who’s surrendering?” Neleth blinked.

“The administration of the Aptic Star System,” said Nefeh.

“The administration of the Aptic Star System...” Then it came back to him.

“Oh, right, they hadn’t surrendered yet!”

“So you forgot. Not that that’s particularly shocking.”

“Then, Aptic’s gone and filed a notice of surrender?”

“It’s not official yet. But we’ve just intercepted a landworld broadcast. Care to watch?”

“Sure. I love **landworld** broadcasts; there’s always so much crazy stuff to see out there,” he said, settling into his **Commander’s Seat**.

Nefeh worked the controls, and a window-screen appeared before Neleth. In that screen spoke an aging Lander male.

“Citizens of the system,” he said, his words dubbed into Abh, “I, Star System Premier Macrit Tallas, have had to make the hardest decision of my life. And though I may have secured the blessings of the cabinet and of Parliament, my sorrow remains great. As you the citizens are already aware, the Imperial Army has urged us to accept their ‘counsel to surrender’ with extremely high-handed vociferousness...”

“Hold on a second!” As soon as Neleth interrupted, the video paused.

“‘Counsel to surrender’? Did *you* ‘counsel’ them?”

“I did not,” said Nefeh, shaking his head.

“Then who?”

“As far as I know, no one. If you counseled them to surrender on your own without telling us, that’d be one thing, but the **Star Forces** have never formally

issued any such thing to the Aptic government.”

“You know it can’t have been *me*.”

“Yes, I know. You’d never do anything that savvy.”

Neleth growled, but decided to wait a while before retorting. “And what’s this about our ‘high-handedness’?”

“No idea. Who’d urge them to accept a counsel to surrender we never even gave them?”

“You might, Nefeh. When all is said and done, you *are* a *Biboth*.”

“Well in your case, Neleth, you might have hectored them, and then forgotten about it afterwards. After all, at the end of the day, you *are* a *Biboth*.”

And with that, Neleth’s confidence took a plunge. He checked his journal log on his **wristgear**, which vouched for the fact that he’d never issued a counsel to surrender, nor impelled them to accept it.

“Looks like it wasn’t me.”

“I *know* it wasn’t you, Neleth,” Nefeh, strangely softly, after having looked on with a stunned expression as Neleth checked his log. “No one is or would ever seriously doubt you on that. Now, uhh... can we resume watching?”

“Yes. Unpause it.”

Unfrozen, the premier’s body came back to life and the audio returned. “...the United Humankind dispatched a fleet in order to rescue us.”

“Wait, that fleet was there to save the peoples of Aptic?” mumbled Neleth, but this time he refrained from having the video be paused again. “Have we... have we done wrong?”

“Yet sadly, on this day, that fleet’s hard-fought struggle came to no avail, repelled by the interlopers. It is truly unfortunate. And it doesn’t take eyes in the sky to foresee the catastrophic damage that would befall our military should we resist. Citizens, I beg of you!” The Premier began sobbing, overcome with emotion. “It would be easy to simply sit here and continue to hope the United Humankind comes to save us!”

“Hold on, how even could they? Now that the **Star Forces** have seized the **portals**, by what means can they even contact the UH capital?” But nobody answered Neleth’s query.

“But you must understand that the UH has a duty to many more star systems across the galaxy! And while this one system is irreplaceable to us, we cannot seriously ask them to bring even more fleets into harm’s way in trying to liberate Aptic. Instead, we should hope for the UH’s overall victory in the war. I, Aptic Star System Premier Macrit Tallas, have come to realize that we have no other choice but to surrender to the Abh Empire. Do note, however, that this is but a momentary ordeal. And I believe we must have faith in that fact, and overcome this tribulation together!”

“Well, if you hate the idea of surrendering that much, why bother!?” said Neleth, biting lightly the knuckle of his index finger. “What say we tell them nobody’s actually issued a counsel to surrender?”

“I don’t know about that. Has it occurred to you that His Excellency the Premier might in fact be lying?”

“Lying? Really?”

“The chances are high. We don’t have any detailed information on that planet, but almost a month has passed since its capture. It’s no wonder if their economy is on the brink of collapse. They might be facing shortages of necessary goods. Which is why I wouldn’t be surprised if they now want to become part of the **Empire**’s economic sphere. And that would make surrendering quickly an enlightened proposition. They know the Three Nations Alliance won’t be returning to Aptic any time soon. So it’s an exceedingly logically sound move to throw in the towel before their economy collapses in earnest.”

“But then, why invent this ‘counsel to surrender’?”

“Don’t ask me, Neleth. Only, I should remind you that we, too, slightly embellish the truth in matters of commerce. I think it’s a similar phenomenon happening here.”

“I see. Then I can understand where they’re coming from,” said Neleth, convinced. “I bet you that the notice of surrender will be coming from the

system administration any time now.”

“I think so, too, so there’s no need to bet on it.”

“That’s too bad.”

“Question, Nefeh: who’ll be the one to *receive* that notice?”

Nefeh’s eyes went wide. “Isn’t it obvious?”

“Tell me, who? No way it’s me, right?”

“Who else could it be besides you?”

“I don’t know — you, maybe,” said Neleth.

“Please, Neleth, give it a rest. Think of how the land peoples would feel if the **Chief of Staff** takes the place of a **Commander-in-Chief** in receiving their surrender. They’d think we were belittling them.”

“You, taking the feelings of the land peoples into consideration? I guess miracles do happen. To think you’d spare a thought towards another’s feelings.”

“We Abhs have never much cared what land peoples think of us, but that being said, it’s me who has to listen to their cutting remarks. That’s what I’m concerned about. I don’t know the first thing about His Excellency the Premier. I’m worried that he has jibes so caustic they’re practically works of art in store for me.”

“Of course...” Neleth gave his twin a look of pity. “The *Biboth* clan doesn’t fit in during formal situations like rituals, and you are the very picture of a *Biboth*.”

“If you’re confident you aren’t the very picture of a *Biboth* yourself, then why don’t you hold the surrender ritual yourself?”

Neleth shuddered. He’d much rather be seen as the exemplar of *Biboth* madness than hold the ritual himself. But he knew Nefeh was in the right. After a while, Neleth came up with a perfect solution.

“Instead of going by **Star Forces rank**, why don’t we go by whoever’s highest in the **imperial hierarchy**? There must be a **noble** who’s higher-ranked than me.”

Upon seeing Nefeh's eyes go wide once again, a bad feeling beset Neleth.

The *Biboth* clan was a storied line, but Neleth and Nefeh belonged to a branch named the *Aronn Nérémr*. The **urnym** of "*Aronn*" indicated he had not inherited a star-fief from his parent, but that he was nevertheless a **noble**, and that his line had been aristocratic since the founding of the Empire. Furthermore, he had only succeeded to the rank of **noble prince**, which, (along with **noble princess**), was the lowest **rank** above that of **knight first-class**. That being said, since Neleth was also a **grand commodore**, he had gained the **title** of "*Rüé Dreuc*" (Imperial Count). The **rank** didn't come with any territory, and only lasted a single generation, but so long as he drew breath, and didn't cause some unspeakable scandal, he would, at the imperial court, enjoy all of the courtesies a bona fide count received. In other words, if there were no **nobles** around higher than count in **rank**, then he was the highest-ranked person in the **Aptic Defensive Fleet** both in terms of **military rank** and in terms of the **imperial hierarchy**.

And counts weren't exactly a dime a dozen, including in the military.

"There, uhh... There isn't anybody, is there?" asked Neleth, afraid to hear the answer.

"Worry not. Though I'm as astonished as ever by just how little you know."

"Then there IS somebody!" It was such welcome news that he didn't even mind the jab.

"Uh-huh. And she's no mere **noble**. She's an **Imperial**. **Her Highness the Viscountess of Parhynh**. In fact, there's even another Count — **His Excellency the Count of Hyde**."

"Count Hyde?" That name rang a bell. "Oh, I remember now. The young man who conquered that **landworld** alongside **Her Highness the Viscountess**."

"The word 'conquered' would be a slight embellishment."

"They say **Her Highness the Viscountess** took the **landworld** with a single, solitary **lightgun**."

"Tell me, Neleth, is it your information source that's off-kilter, or your memory? Either way, you've taken a departure from reality. There are detailed

records of that incident, you know.”

“I have no interest in the truth. The fiction is typically much more entertaining.”

“You’re not wrong... But wait, that’s exactly the attitude that has soured our clan’s reputation.”

“Just think: those two famed figures, under my command,” said Neleth, not paying attention.

“I don’t mind waiting until you have the time on your hands, but please, you simply must teach me the secret behind how you can remain so ignorant as to your own fleet.”

“What would be the point of knowing? What, would I position her someplace safe and implore her not to get hurt?”

“That is a frightening scenario you’ve dreamed up, Neleth.”

“So you see. Whenever a member of that clan thinks they’ve strayed unfairly far from danger, they tend to blow their lid, or at least come close. They appear to regard flinging themselves into the fire as an intrinsic right. That’s why knowing she was in my fleet would have changed nothing. I can’t direct her ship any differently from the others. By the way, which ship is **Her Highness** aboard?”

“If I recall correctly, her **rank** is **Deca-Commander**.” But he couldn’t recall her ship offhand, so he looked it up on his **wristgear**. “I knew it, she *is* a **Deca-Commander**. She was the **Captain** of the **assault ship** *Basrogrh*.”

“What do you mean, ‘was’?”

“The *Basrogrh* is no more. But **Her Highness** came out unscathed. Don’t worry; there’s nothing stopping you from making her *Rüé Lusagac* (Imperial Representative).”

“Then it’s settled. Though if she’s an **assault ship captain**, her crew is a small one. We’ll have to send an administration officer from Headquarters.”

“That, you just have to get done yourself.”

“Yeah. And we’ll have to make the preparations for the signature venue and

the post-signing celebratory feast here at Headquarters too.”

“Right. I’ll handle the arrangements, so don’t fret. I do want your **adjutant**’s help, though. Can I borrow them for a bit?”

“Sure. I’ll tell them. Actually, I just remembered...”

“What?”

“About the post-signing ‘celebratory’ banquet...”

“Yes, what about it?”

“Well, it’s just that while it’s certainly something to celebrate for us — adding another inhabited planet to the Empire — it’s not for *them*. So I was wondering if we should still keep the name of the banquet as the ‘celebratory feast.’”

“I and the **adjutant** will deal with the annoying particulars. But we’ll have **Her Highness** fill the role of **Imperial Representative**, and **His Excellency the Count of Hyde** will serve as *Rüé Roilusagac* (Secondary Imperial Representative). As such, Neleth...”

“Yes, Nefeh?”

“The least you can do is give the name of the function a think.”

The first thing the assault ship *Basrogrh*’s **carrycraft** did was to hitch alongside the *ghasiac* (med ship) *Carsaic* and transfer over all of the casualties. Afterward, they headed toward the **base canteen** *Dacruc*, which had been designated the resting camp for crewmembers of destroyed ships. The passenger seating of the carrycraft consisted of individual crystal-ceramic planks with elastic cushiony material affixed to each. They were also equipped with safety belts. Whenever the vessel underwent acceleration, they were just like sleeping bunks to lie down on, and when microgravity held sway inside, it didn’t much matter whether one was sleeping, standing, or sitting.

Lafier was lying relaxed on the foremost seat. Meanwhile, the carrycraft was decelerating, its stern facing *Dacruc*. Eventually, a small impact shock coursed through the ship, signaling they were accelerating no longer. Sobash, the ship’s pilot, was no slouch at the task.

Now that microgravity had taken effect, she wasted no time releasing the safety belt, drifting into the air, and reporting to Headquarters that they'd arrived through her **wristgear**. Once she was done delivering the report, she looked up to find the surviving crewmembers staring in her direction.

"All NCCs are permitted to disembark. By my authority as Captain, I grant you 24 hours' rest. I will inform you of where we will be assembling before the end of the break period, so take it easy until then," said Lafier, but the cheers were half-hearted. Not only was the crew tired, but many had lost friends and comrades. In fact, aboard a vessel of **assault ship** size, everyone knew everyone. "The **starpilots** are to stand by," she added.

As she watched the **NCCs** get off the ship, the other starpilots gathered around her. "I can't authorize a break for you three just yet."

"That's a bummer," said Samson.

"However, as there's no mission to follow at the moment, I do authorize you to conduct yourselves freely. Just keep in mind that we may have to reassemble on an emergency basis at any time."

"Well, I guess you're just being realistic," Samson shrugged. Then he faced Sobash: "What do you say to a drink celebrating the survivors, **Senior Starpilot?**"

"I'm all for it, **Linewing Starpilot,**" grinned Sobash. "But this time, don't fall asleep on me. I really don't feel like opening your mouth and making you gulp down a sobriety pill."

"It won't come to that, don't you worry."

And so the two took their leave.

*Come to think of it, thought Lafier, we never drank the rest of **Hecto-Commander** Atosryua's **apple cider**. Oh well. It's not as though I particularly like apple cider.*

Ecryua showed Jint the carrier in her hands. "Can I take him with me? He seems like he could use some exercise." Needless to say, the carrier's furry occupant was none other than Dyaho.

“Ah, yeah, sure.” Jint smiled bittersweetly. “Sorry, I’m an irresponsible pet owner.”

“Tell that to the cat.”

“It’s fine; he’s an irresponsible cat, so we deserve each other.”

“Is that so.” And so Ecryua saluted before disembarking.

“What’re you gonna do now, Lafier?” asked Jint.

“I haven’t decided yet,” she said, shaking her head. “What about you?”

“I dunno, what *do* I do?” Jint cocked his head, and as a result started rotating in midair. Then he grabbed hold of a seat and held his body in place. “Would you care to dine with me, **Your Highness?**”

“I appreciate the offer, but I’m not really hungry at the moment.”

“Well, there goes that idea. So, what do we do?”

“Don’t be so daft. Just go eat by yourself.”

“Thing is, I’m not that hungry, either.”

“Then why did you invite me for a meal?” she asked, not getting Jint’s intentions at all.

“Don’t trouble yourself over it. From time to time, I just act on a whim,” he sighed.

At that moment, their **wristgears** beeped, indicating a message was received. Lafier read the freshly sent message. Then, she frowned.

“Me, a ‘Secondary Imperial Representative’!?” squeaked Jint, his voice going funny. He, too, had read his message. “Why have I got to do such stupid...”

“Because you’re under orders. You have no other choice.” Lafier was hardly gung-ho about the idea herself, but she had no right to object. They were now enjoined to accept the Aptic Star System’s surrender on behalf of the Empire.

“But I’m just a **Linewing Starpilot**. Why would such a big role go to me...?”

“Because you’re also a **count**, obviously,” said Lafier.

“I see. So this is just another thing that comes with the **rank**.” The message

wasn't long at all, yet Jint's eyes lingered. "But then... this means I have to attend *as* a **count**, right?"

"Of course," said Lafier, wondering what the issue was.

"My non-uniform clothing and my **count's circlet** is now interstellar matter along with the rest of the *Basrogrh*. Which, I think, is a bit of a problem."

"Oh, you're right..." Lafier hadn't carried out the articles she adorned herself with as a **royal princess**, either. At the **Royal Palace of Clybh**, located in the **imperial capital** of *Lacmhacarh*, she had clothing and accessories enough to fill the hold of a small ship, but there wasn't enough time to send out for any. After all, the signing ceremony was scheduled for three days from now.

Still, with regard to their attire, they were in the clear, seeing as *Dacruc* had several clothing stores. They could put together some appropriate raiment. They could even probably find accessories, though not easily. The real concern was her **royal princess's circlet**. One couldn't find one in any store, not even in *Lacmhacarh*.

"Jint, you are about to become a busy man. You *are*, among other things, my **Clerk**."

"I'm thrilled," said Jint glumly. "Now I won't have to think of how to kill all this time."

Those three days would be a whirlwind for the hapless pair. They were forced to arrange for everything down to their own outfits during the intervals between meetings with the Preparatory Committee for the Surrender Signing Ceremony that Headquarters had established for the occasion. In Jint's case, the **circlet** problem proved simple enough to solve — his circlet had no spatiosensory perception functionality; it was entirely decorative. Moreover, the **wristgear** that was attached to his person contained the specs for the circlet of the **Count of Hyde**. From there, all it took was to recreate one using the equipment aboard a **repair ship**, and he obtained it in a half a day's time. Only, the synthetic jewels used as replacements were of much shabbier quality than the real deal's jewels had been. Not that Jint, who'd rarely ever held his **count's circlet** in hand, even noticed before the officer in charge of carrying out his

request apologized about it to him.

Arranging Lafier's ensemble, on the other hand, proved more of a hassle. All the clothing stores on *Dacruc* contained were pale imitations, made under the assumption that they'd eventually be turned to plasma during some space scuffle. In the end, it was decided that her **long robe** would have to be specially sewn. The **jumpsuit** underneath would be her regular **military uniform**. The long robe would hide the rank insignia anyway, and so the landworlders would never know she was only what the UH would categorize as a "lieutenant."

As for the **royal princess's circlet**, that proved most difficult of all. Unlike Jint's non-*frocragh*-enabled circlet, hers was a real one, allowing her the personal radar she enjoyed on a daily basis. Incorporating that gadgetry while also adding the exquisite ornamentation befitting an Imperial was a load too heavy for the repair ships of the **Aptic Defensive Fleet**. Furthermore, it took time to fine-tune a circlet for its wearer. Ultimately, all they could do was decorate her standard military-issue circlet with similar embellishments. In addition, the jewels used for this makeshift circlet were akin to glass balls compared to the originals, which were synthesized by jewelry masters with great care and attention, and sculpted with the utmost fineness. But the **royal princess** resolved to make do.

As for the venue for the ceremony, the **supply ship** *Reumseth* would be chosen for the honor. Strewn on the floor of its hold (which was also packed with **mobile space-time mines**), lay flakes of synthetic gemstone, and the walls and ceilings were decorated in lavish fashion. This was all done by a work crew under the direct command of **Headquarters**; Lafier and Jint were not involved. Another aspect the two lacked any involvement with was one that vexed Command the most — the paper.

Aside from specific instances of cultural preservation, humanity had abandoned paper as a storage medium long ago, and the Abh were no exception. Yet paper was essential for formalized cross-cultural pacts like theirs. The *glagac byrer* (fleet flagship) had around a ream of sheets of paper in stock if ever the area's military needed to accept an enemy star system's surrender. Or it would have, had the **Budget Branch** not forgotten to stock that paper. And nobody had noticed until now, the moment it was required.

At once, the **Pharmaceutical Branch** was ordered to produce paper, as the *Iodaïrh Creurér* (Pharmaceuticals starpilots) were thought to be the closest thing on hand to “experts on paper,” but for them, this task proved quite the pain in the neck. Figuring all they needed were a few sheets of paper, they reviewed the technical information stored in the **compucrystal net**, destroyed the few wood products they had around for raw materials, and finally, on the morning of the day of the ceremony, made sixteen whole sheets.

While all this was happening, it was **Senior Starpilot** Sobash who maintained command of the former crew of the *Basrogrh*. Of course, since the ship was no more, and they were not made to help with preparations for the ceremony, all he could do was extend their temporary break period (including for himself). Samson drank by the bucketful while Ecryua deepened her bond with Dyaho, until at last, the day arrived.

“Wow, it’s surprisingly imposing,” said Jint, scanning the assembly place. It may have been a dash job of three days, carried out by a temporary fleet, but it looked nothing short of exquisite. An onyx-like pattern adorned the floor, and a stately wooden desk sat at the center. To the sides, **Star Forces starpilots** and high-ranking star system officials stood in their lines, while the landworld’s press corps were camped in a corner. Meanwhile, the *Biboth* twins, who by all rights should have been the central figures of the day’s pomp, were blending in with the rest of the attendees. Finally, from the ceiling were suspended two flags, the **imperial crest banner**, and what could only be the flag of the star system’s government.

“What did you expect?” said Lafier. “To us, this is an everyday function, but to the **landworld**, this will alter the course of their history.”

“An everyday function, huh...”

The **Empire** did boast more than 1,500 inhabited star systems. And while more than half were built up by the Abh themselves, the number of systems they had conquered was no small figure. They’d gone through the motions of accepting star systems’ surrender countless times already, that much was certainly true. Yet Jint, who himself hailed from a planet so conquered, harbored mixed feelings, and the fact that that planet’s system was now technically *his own fief* didn’t help matters.

“His Excellency Macrit Tallas, Premier of the Aptic Star System!” shouted the *Luciac Byrer* (Fleet Adjutant). At that moment, the middle-aged man on the opposite side of the venue from Jint pushed forward.

“Their Excellencies, Aptic Star System Executive Council Chairperson Sap Ricfest and Aptic Star System Lead Supreme Court Justice Yuna Fajills.” When their names were called, each high official stepped toward the desk. Then, it was the imperial representatives’ turn.

“Her Highness *Abliarsec Néic Dubreuscr Bærh Parhynr Lamhirh*, Representative of the **Humankind Empire of Abh.**”

Once the adjutant’s summons was translated into the common language of the UH, it caused a stir amidst the star system government’s side. They must not have ever expected a bearer of the **title** of “*Fiac*” to appear before them. A number of their faces lit up with a visible contentment, and yes, even pride.

The hem of Lafier’s **long robe** waved in the air as she approached the desk.

“His Excellency *Linn Ssynec Raucr Dreuc Haider Ghintec*, **Secondary Representative of the Humankind Empire of Abh.**”

Once Jint’s name was called, the stir grew greater still. Only, they weren’t struck by the presence of a **count**; rather, the fact that this **noble** was clearly a landworlder had thrown them. But Jint was already quite accustomed to this reaction. It was even nostalgic, in a way.

And so, the representatives of both sides were now together, the desk the only object between them. Jint took the document from out of his **long robe**’s breast pocket and unrolled it. “As **Imperial Secondary Representative**, I shall read the conditions of surrender.”

Tallas and the other star system officials stared at Jint, their eyes brimming with overflowing curiosity. Jint ignored them and raised the parchment to eye level. “The Aptic Star System will transfer all of its sovereignty and dominion to the **Humankind Empire of Abh**, including that which it ceded to the ‘United Humankind,’ and it will hereafter comply with **Empire** law as a **territory-nation.**”

After he was finished reading out the surrender conditions, Jint laid them

before the Premier alongside a memchip containing the laws of the Empire. The provisions of imperial law had been presented to the star system government beforehand, enumerating the various obligations of a so-called “**territory-nation**.” These included the prohibition of interstellar navigation, the requirement of their **lord or lady**’s approval to become a **landworld citizen representative**, and the nonnegotiable establishment of a **Star Forces recruiting office**.

With Jint’s responsibility fulfilled, Lafier retrieved another document. “Should the **Empire** make demands in excess of the scope outlined in the law, the **landworld administration** bears the right to decline, as acknowledged here.”

Lafier then laid it down in front of her, and took a pointed writing implement known as a *sygh* (scrivenbrush) in hand.

“Sign here, if you so please,” Jint told Tallas.

“Yes,” he nodded, drawing out a fountain pen (an artifact of a bygone age) to write his signature. Lafier checked the signature, and jotted her own beautifully curvaceous, stylized signature onto her document before the two exchanged papers.

“Though this is a pact I sign begrudgingly, we have here forged a new relationship nevertheless.” Tallas proffered a hand.

Lafier looked totally confused.

“Your Excellency,” Jint interjected, “I’m terribly sorry, but shaking hands isn’t an Abh custom.”

“I see...” Embarrassed, he withdrew his hand.

“I am aware that this is not a joyful turn of events for Your Excellency or for the system’s honorable peoples, but all the same, I welcome you to the jurisdiction of the **Empire**,” said Lafier, bowing her head slightly. “I promise that as soon as possible, a **lord or lady**, or else a **magistrate**, will be assigned to this **territory-nation**. In the meantime, I, the **Viscountess of Parhynh**, will act as *Cfariac* (Lady Agent). Is this amenable to you?”

In reality, it didn’t matter whether they found this amenable; the **landworld citizens** had no actual say. Her query was merely a formality.

“Now, in my capacity as **Lady Agent**, I shall hereby approve of the **landworld citizen representatives**. Whom do you desire as the foremost representative?”

“The people elected me,” said Tallas.

“Does Your Excellency plan to incite or plot specific action against the **Empire** in order to secede?” she asked.

“No. I will keep such thoughts as fantasies in my head,” he replied. “Unless that, too, is a crime?”

“We have no intention of interfering with your inner life,” she answered with the gravest solemnity. “I approve you for the role of **landworld citizen representative**.”

And with those words, the Aptic Star System administration under the United Humankind was dissolved, and instantly replaced by the **Humankind Empire of Abh's Dreuhynh Apticer** (Countdom of Aptic).

Chapter 11: *İucrabé Dina* (Toward a Fresh New Field of Battle)

Here was the **imperial capital** of *Lacmhacarh*, also known as the **Base of the Dragon's Necks**, the **Abh Metropolis**, the **Capital of Eight Portals**, the **Turbulent Capital**, the **Capital of Love, Homespace**, the **Cradle of the Empire**, and the **Unfelled**. It was a collection of countless artificial planetoids revolving around the sun named "Abliar," and in the orbit closest to that star sailed the **Imperial Palace**. The palace's previous form was as an enormous city-ship; at a point in their past, every single Abh called that ship their home, and its population exceeded one million in number. As of the present day, the ship that was now the **Imperial Palace** was even more vast. A few **orbital strongholds** were yet larger, but those were all remodeled asteroids; in terms of structures that were entirely the fruit of human hands and human industry, the Imperial Palace was indeed among the largest ever created.

Were the **Imperial Palace** solely the residence of the **Empress**, it would hardly necessitate such sheer volume. But it was also where the Empire's central political functions were concentrated.

From the *Bauchimiäch* (Chancellor's Office) to the *Üalodiach* (Supreme Command Base), a multitude of highly important imperial agencies resided within the Imperial Palace. In addition, the palace was the only institution where non-citizens could dwell. Once, there were official residences set up for the diplomats of seventeen different nations, but now, only one was left.

Yet almost no one in the **Empire** felt any sense of isolation from this, or thought it much of a bad thing at all.

"You're leaving your post?" said *Chidoryac Baurgh Sidec Chidh*, the *Rüé Bauchimh* (Imperial Chancellor), raising his eyes.

"Yes. My term of office is up," said the ambassador of the only nation with diplomatic relations with the **Empire**, the Hania Federation. "As such, I think I would like to ask you to convey to **Her Majesty the Empress** my salutations

upon my parting, Lonh-*Bauchimr*.”

“With pleasure,” he replied. “I have to say, though, I’ll miss you.”

“It is an honor to hear that.”

Gwen was using a machine translator. Coupled with his expressionless face, the robotic voice made him seem even more unreadable.

“But honestly, how about removing that translator for this, our last time together? It’s so hard on the ears,” *Chidoryac* smiled. “I know full well you understand Baronh perfectly, Ambassador.”

Gwen’s expressionlessness gave way, as a grin curled his lips; apparently, he was proud of the spot of mischief that the Chancellor had just gotten the measure of.

“All right.” Gwen removed the translator without a second thought, and began speaking in fluent Baronh, such that *Chidoryac*, who thought he’d gotten one up on the Ambassador, instead ended up feeling strangely outfoxed himself. “To tell you the truth, this machine made me want to smash it against something from time to time, too. There’s one thing about it I can’t stand.”

“What would that be, Ambassador?” said *Chidoryac*, still taken aback.

“No matter who’s speaking, it always translates that speech in the voice of my ex-wife.”

“Couldn’t you change the voice at any time?”

“It’s silly of me, but if I don’t hear my nagging wife’s voice at least once a day, I get uneasy like you would scarcely believe,” said Gwen, smirking. His expression was now an exceedingly friendly one. “Listening to the who’s who of the **Empire**, and even **Her Majesty** herself, speak in my wife’s voice is a bizarre experience.”

“I can imagine,” said *Chidoryac*, yet to sort his feelings on the matter. “By the way, when will you be stepping down?”

“Hmm... I believe it’s technically as soon as the new ambassador takes the post. So you can greet Her Majesty for me at your leisure. Only, I would be grateful if you could inform her in confidence.”

“I understand. I’ll notify Her Majesty before day’s end.” The Chancellor suspended what he was doing and stood up. “Say, would you care to take a stroll with me? I don’t believe I’ve ever guided you to the **Chancellor’s Office’s** garden.”

The sheen in Gwen’s eyes turned sharp, as though trying to size up the **Imperial Chancellor’s** true intentions, but that lasted nary an instant.

“I would love to take you up on that offer.”

“I’m glad to hear that.” *Chidoryac* then addressed the secretary in the other room: “We’re going to go look at the azaleas.”

That was code for, *so everybody else should give the garden a wide berth.*

Then *Chidoryac* climbed aboard the **personal transporter**, and off they went.

The space allotted to the **Chancellor’s Office** was quite roomy. Going at the personal transporter’s more relaxed-pace setting, it took them five whole minutes to cross the corridor.

“May I ask you a personal question, *Lonh-Bauchimr*?” asked Gwen atop the transporter.

“By all means. What would you like to know?”

“Why did you become a bureaucrat for the **Empire**?”

Chidoryac came from a **landworld**, a planet named Sehba in the *Dreuhynh Amhalaicr* (Countdom of *Amhalaich*). In other words, he was not an Abh by birth. Though naturally, now that he was **Imperial Chancellor**, he received all the respect due a **noble**, and he could even obtain a **star-fief** once he retired. He had a son and a daughter, but they were Abh in appearance as well as in name — blue hair, stunning looks, and built for life in space. These days, with his once-black hair turning white, and veins surfacing on the backs of his hands, the fact that he was not a born Abh was screaming at him now more than ever.

“My home society lacks much of anything that’s fun or interesting, so I was dying to fly through space since I was a lad. But I never wanted to be a **soldier**. It’s difficult for **landworlders** to reach **starpilot** rank, and for someone like me without *frocragh*, being a **Flight Branch starpilot** was always out of the

question. But there was a whole road of opportunity open to me in the bureaucracy. In fact, even now, the bureaucracy seems to hold no appeal to people born with blue hair; it's largely the bastion of landworlders."

"I see. So you've realized the dream you've had since an early age."

"I guess so, Ambassador," he said, smiling wryly at himself. "But if you ask me, dreams are a lot more fun un-realized. If you make a wish come true, you come to feel it's not as fun as you thought. Though of course, that's just my opinion. Right now, I'm dreaming about the **star-fief** I'll be able to receive after retiring. It'll probably be nothing more than a mere **barony**, but I'd like to work my way up to a **viscountdom** through my laudable and meritorious service. I know I won't be able to see a green planet be my domain before I die, but don't you agree that building up a planet by your own hands is nothing to sneeze at as a post-retirement hobby?"

According to the **Empire's** stipulations, **baronies** and **viscountdoms** were the same in that they contained no inhabitable planets. However, a **viscountdom** always contained at least one planet that could be *made* inhabitable.

"I think that sounds like a magnificent pastime, Your Excellency," nodded the Ambassador of the Hania Federation.

The passageway was impressively ornamented, but otherwise empty. Suddenly, it came to an end, leading into a wide open space. The Chancellor's Office's garden was carpeted in lawn grass, and centered around a fountain. Flower beds arranged in geometric patterns boasted a great variety of flowers in full bloom.

"We've arrived, Ambassador," said *Chidoryac*, parking the **transporter** by a long bench.

"It's beautiful," he said, with no hint of insincerity. "I can't say it's particularly Abh-like, though."

"I heard it was the hobby of a Chancellor some chancellors back. As I told you earlier, there are many **landworlders** within the bureaucracy, and not many chancellors have had blue hair."

"Is that so? I'd be hard pressed to find a garden in this style even back home.

But to the Abh, nature is just a gentle force that exists to be pretty. In the eyes of someone like me, who hails from a planet frequently bedeviled by floods, I find it's missing a certain something."

"No offense," said *Chidoryac*, "but you're wrong. The Abh do sense nature as a threat often enough. Though their conception is different from us **landworlders** in that the first thing that springs to mind for them when talk turns to the perils of nature happens to be explosions on the surface of a star."

"Explosions on the surface of a star? That can't be a very common occurrence."

"Not from our perspective, no," he said, gesturing Gwen to sit. "But you should never forget that the Abh control many stars, and are always sailing through what amounts to the space between those stars. In the history of any given **landworld**, there may or may not be records of its sun acting abnormally, and rarely are there ever records of multiple different such episodes. To the Abh, however, it's a relatively compelling, ever-present danger."

"Incidentally," said Gwen, who took a seat and cocked his head, "are you not an Abh as well, Lonh-*Bauchimr*? You are speaking as though you aren't."

Chidoryac just smiled faintly. He knew the Ambassador understood why that was. And Gwen didn't pry any further into it, thereby proving it.

The **Imperial Chancellor** sat beside the Ambassador.

"May I inquire a bit more about something we discussed earlier?" asked Gwen.

"Yes, ask away."

"You did me the kindness of explaining to me your personal reasons. Yet, am I mistaken in my assumption that there is also a larger reason?"

"A larger reason, you say?"

"Your Excellency, you stand at the very pinnacle of the bureaucratic mechanism that runs the **Empire**. You must harbor a fair amount of anxiety, and I'm afraid I'm not convinced that you're content with your reward for conquering that anxiety being a star system that isn't even inhabited."

“You never disappoint,” *Chidoryac* laughed dryly.

“Oh? Have I said something that warrants such praise?”

“Up until three years ago, the various sirs and madams that were the allies of your nation would have been satisfied with the answer that I gave. Apart from the obvious remuneration, they wouldn’t be able to think of what might motivate somebody to serve the ‘unprincipled’ **Empire**. But even a star system without a citizenry can yield wealth.”

“Is wealth all that motivates you?” Gwen’s expression had reverted to the mask it was when he’d been using the translator.

“It’s nothing to me either way you take it, but how’s this for a reason,” said *Chidoryac*, looking his conversation partner right in the face: “The **Empire** and its ways are the only thing that can seal the dragon that is modern times.”

“I’m afraid I’m unclear as to what you’re trying to say...”

“Are you really? No, forgive me, it’s unbecoming of me to doubt you so rashly. But I ask you to understand that I’m feeling some reluctance to explain it in any further detail. All I can say is that the people behind the Member-Nations of the Nova Sicilia Treaty Organization tend to focus too narrowly on the differences between the imperial and democratic systems of government, despite there being even greater chasms between the **Empire** and those nations.”

“Well, you are speaking with rather literary flourishes,” said Gwen, referring to his use of the words “dragon” and “chasms.” “You’re certainly not all-business. But in any case, allow me to correct you on one point. I remind you that we, the Hania Federation, is also one of ‘those nations.’ We still uphold our end of the Nova Sicilia Accords. We’ve simply refrained from aligning with our allies on this matter.”

“Oh of course, I know that, Ambassador. Yet your nation strikes me as a tad *different* from the others, so it appears I forget from time to time.”

“Different?” Gwen’s eyes lit up.

“Oh, never mind me, Ambassador,” said *Chidoryac*, averting his gaze from Gwen’s face toward the dazzlingly full-bloom orchids in front. “I should leave the abstractions to others; it doesn’t suit a business-type like me.”

“Don’t worry, you haven’t hurt my feelings,” said the Ambassador, waving his hand. “It’s undeniable that the history of the formation of our Federation stands out.”

Almost all interstellar powers had experienced annexing or merging with other nations, to say nothing of the **Empire**. But the Hania Federation had never assimilated any other nations. The beginnings of the Federation lay in the civilization that was the first in human history to bring planar space navigation to fruition — the Sumei Star System. The Sumeinians made use of planar space to settle myriad low-population systems en masse, expanding their might and influence along the way. Those large settler populations then agreed to be incorporated into the Federation, and while it did employ tactics that could be called “invasionary” depending on one’s point of view, history attested that the Federation never once expanded through means of military pressure or the cooperation of its allied powers.

“Now, may I at last ask you the real reason Your Excellency has deigned to show me this garden?”

“Whatever do you mean?” *Chidoryac* played dumb. “I had yet to engage in a personal conversation with you, so I just thought I’d use this opportunity, Ambassador.”

“A conversation with an ambassador who will be stepping down?”

“I’m not *that* devoted to the work side of things, you know. What’s running through your mind?”

“So you want me to come out and say it, I see,” said Gwen, grinning wryly. “Very well. I know that your nation has its concerns regarding our Federation. You fear that in the end, the Hania Federation will be loyal to the Nova Sicilia Accords, and that really, we’re just waiting for the perfect chance to rejoin the fray and strike the most brutal and effective blow possible.”

“Contemplating the worst-case scenario is just part of politics. It’s a regrettable eventuality, but I ask you kindly to understand. I must say, though, I fail to comprehend what that has to do with our stroll. Even if I asked you something of the essence, you would never answer, Ambassador.”

“Even if I answered, you would never believe me, *Lonh-Bauchimr*. But nothing

is stopping you from trying to get a *feel* for our Federation's true intentions through my responses."

"I'd never," said *Chidoryac*, stroking his face. "It may be different in your nation, but in the **Empire**, bureaucrats have their hands full simply carrying out everyday affairs. We don't make a habit of meddling with matters of great importance, or nation-level shifts."

"You are being humble. It goes without saying that a mere ambassador such as myself doesn't know much, but I reckon that if I learn how Central is treating me, it may be of some assistance. Am I off the mark?"

"Ambassador, it is you who are being humble. I've heard that your position matches that of a cabinet minister's in prestige," was all *Chidoryac* said in response.

"You overestimate me. Don't get me wrong, your nation is more than important enough to send a delegation equal in status to cabinet ministers. But that isn't me."

"Come now, I don't believe you," said *Chidoryac*, passing it off as a joke, but this may have been the one time his words reflected his actual opinion. "Though I suppose it would be rude of me to gainsay you like that. Now then, may I ask *you* a personal question, Ambassador?"

"But of course."

"Forgive me in advance for my rudeness and my prying, but if and when the **Empire** wins this war, then your honorable nation would be left in an overwhelmingly vulnerable position. What do you think the Federation should do in that case? Would your peoples feel fear at the prospect of holding their own with the **Empire** without any allies?"

"My my, Your Excellency; that is not a question I would call 'personal.'"

"I am asking you for your personal opinion, Ambassador, sir. Is that not 'personal' enough?"

"My personal opinion, eh?" Gwen folded his arms. His mien of deep reflection came across as slightly affected. "I'm afraid that since I haven't given the idea much thought, I don't have an answer for the sudden question."

“You’ve never given it thought?” *Chidoryac* looked surprised.

“That’s right. Not to repeat myself, but I am a mere ambassador. Even if I ponder the future of nations, nothing of value will result from it. So I don’t have a personal opinion. I can, however, introduce you to a certain train of thought.”

“Oh?” The Chancellor narrowed his eyes with intense interest.

“As you know, we have obtained many planets through settling. But it was not our goal to obtain those planets; that was simply the end result. Put another way, we terraformed planets in order to secure living space for our burgeoning population. And before we realized it, we had a multitude of star systems under our control.”

“I see.”

“Our Federation is akin to one giant family, with the Sumei Star System as the parent standing above her children. Planets that have only just begun being settled need support from more developed planets, and can’t maintain security on their own. For a variety of reasons, the descendants of the Sumeinians consolidating the systems into one overarching federation was very much the natural course of events. And yet, with hindsight, one must wonder whether a ‘family’ really needs a single locus of power. In any case, the point is, when a population grows, there needs to be new living space.”

“A fascinating history, Ambassador.”

“On the other hand, we can’t seem to shake the habit of thinking of ourselves as ‘Sumeinians.’ Sumeinian culture holds to a unique logical framework, you see. Obviously, that Sumeinian lifestyle has spread to every corner of the Hania Federation. And there’s nothing we detest more than outsiders chiming in on our systems of thought. At least, that is one of our core values. Which is why Sumeinians desire worlds comprised solely of Sumeinians if at all possible, and a lot of worlds at that. To elaborate even more, they want those Sumeinian worlds to multiply at some point. Although, to be fair, acquiring more worlds would be the outcome, not the goal. Ultimately, if Sumeinians get their way and set up worlds of nothing but Sumeinians, a Sumeinian federation of systems — a single locus of power — would no longer be strictly necessary.”

“That... that is quite an unshrinking opinion.”

“It isn’t *my* opinion, and I implore you to avoid that impression. I’ve just recounted to you *an* opinion, one among many.”

“But with powers like the United Humankind around, that desire will never come to be.”

“Correct,” said Gwen, nodding vigorously. “Over there, it’s one’s personal liberty where they settle, and a star system government can’t deny their decision. The Greater Alkont Republic and the People’s Sovereign Stellar Union are no different, either. As far as I know, there is only one power that grants star system governments the right of settler selection.”

“‘**Landworld administrations**,’” *Chidoryac* corrected him, “not ‘star system governments.’ That is the term used in that one power.”

“Right, of course.” Gwen joined his hands and rested his chin. “But the point stands. If we manage to fulfill that condition, then we don’t need an interstellar state of our own. At least, that is what many believe.”

“I see. So if the **Empire** collapses, then Hania can just continue as normal, and if the Empire wins, then there’s no urge to try to deal with an enormous galactic power on equal terms.”

“According to that train of thought, yes. But needless to say, there are many who don’t think kindly of that view. In fact, many go beyond the realm of mere disagreement; they feel that opinion cannot be allowed to exist.”

“No matter where you go, there are always people who receive preferential treatment from the state.”

“That is the truth. As such, Central may indeed be waiting for the perfect moment to strike, just as your honorable nation fears. I, a mere ambassador, am not privy to such matters. But I urge you not to fly to conclusions. Since we are a part of the Nova Sicilia Treaty Organization, there is little chance our Federation will lend a hand to the Empire’s cause. But that does not necessarily then mean that we will assist in the efforts to defeat the Empire, either. There is a distinct possibility that we remain silent observers.” Then Gwen got up to his feet. “Now then, *Lonh-Bauchimr*. I couldn’t possibly take up any more of Your Excellency’s valuable time, yet regrettably, I must ask for a guide, for I don’t know where the exit is.”

“I will guide you, all the way to the entry to the **Chancellor’s Office**.”

“That is too kind of you, I couldn’t...”

“Please, it’s no trouble at all. This is an expression of my gratitude. Though I do feel as though you may have just talked me into doing you this favor.”

Lafier was freed from her status as **Lady Agent** of the Countdom of Aptic about two weeks later. Granted, the only duty she’d actually carried out as Lady Agent was approving Macrit Tallas for the **landworld administration**, but she was still deeply grateful to be released from this position, because it kept her bound to Aptic, unable to return to her mission in the **Star Forces**. In the meantime, the **title** of **Countess of Aptic** would go to **Empress Lamagh**, with an experienced **magistrate** dispatched to take care of all of the actual work. Once the **magistrate** arrived, Lafier hurried to board a **carrycraft** and headed for **Vobayrneh Astrobase**. Jint, who had been foisted with the truly ill-defined designation of *Roïcfariac* (Adjunct to the Lady Agent), came too, with Dyaho tagging along for the ride.

As they put Aptic behind them, the enemy fleets were still fighting to the best of their ability in Wimber. But if they didn’t surrender, most believed it would only be a matter of time before those forces were no more. After all, the **Star Forces** had laid claim to the surrounding **portals**, reinforced their fleet, and put an ever-tighter squeeze on the remaining enemy ships. It wouldn’t take long before the military could resume their supply-line strategy. The enemy no longer had the numbers to hinder the Abhs in the area.

Fresh new ships were being taken to **Vobayrneh** without pause. Facilities capable of constructing **interstellar ships** resided solely in the **imperial capital**, so all warships, too, were crafted in *Lacmhacarh*. Typically, the whole crew would board the new ship at the **capital** before taking it on a familiarization voyage, but in this time of war, they couldn’t afford to abide by that tradition. Replacing downed warships, in particular, was now a task for **astrobases**. Large ships would be taken to their destinations by a small number of navigation crew, while smaller ships would be taken within **supply ships**.

Inside the chatting lounge room of the carrycraft *Baururh*, which had passed

through the **Vobayrneh Portal**, Lafier was gazing at the footage of the outside. It was a collection of spheres with a number of tubes floating in the vicinity — the *Locrh Bhobéirnair* (Vobayrneh Construction Site). And around the construction site hovered countless enormous **supply ships**. Astrobase construction sites were a bit of a misnomer, as they couldn't construct ships, but they could easily repair them. In fact, the **assault ship** that Lafier rode was undergoing its final round of inspections there now.

"Looks like we can finally hitch Dyaho a ride to the **Royal Palace of Clybh**," said Jint.

Said cat was currently dozing on a couch in that room, which was occupied only by the duo and their pet, since this carrycraft flight was arranged for their sakes.

"At first I thought he was just super friendly with everybody, but now I know better. He's just got no desire to engage with anything. He musters plenty of energy when I try to get him washed, but apart from that, he's lazy as sin."

"Ah, I see now," said Lafier, hitting upon a new realization. "I thought you and Dyaho were similar, but I couldn't put my finger on how. But now I know."

"Would you stop," frowned Jint. "I'm not lazy; I'm calm and collected."

"And how do you know Dyaho isn't 'calm and collected'? How can you tell the difference between 'collected' and 'lazy'? You can't tell through your actions."

"I don't scratch people during bathtime."

As soon the word "bath" left Jint's lips, Dyaho perked up an ear. Clearly, he was on high alert.

"It's the only word he knows," Jint shrugged. "If I take a single step toward him, he'll sprint off."

"Then don't. If he damages the furnishings, I'll have the Unit Commander to answer to."

"I won't. Dyaho's a hurricane when he's running away. He may be small, but he's a beast of tooth and claw."

"Is he now? Well, in that case, you are different from him. Because even

when you're fleeing for your life, your expression is lax as can be," she said. For Lafier, this was not poking fun; she was merely stating her unvarnished estimation.

"Thanks for the judicious evaluation of my character," said Jint exasperatedly, before taking a seat and looking at the live feed of the outside being displayed on the walls. The construction site was zooming larger and larger; they'd be bearing alongside it in no time.

"Guess it's nearly time." Jint took the cat carrier in hand and approached the couch upon which Dyaho lay sprawled.

"Is it going to be okay?" worried Lafier.

"Oh, you mean you-know-what?" he said, avoiding the word "bath." "It's fine; he's forgotten by now. Plus, the little guy likes being inside the carrier, for the most part. Don't even need to pick him up."

And, exactly as he said, Jint had only to open the carrier for Dyaho to nestle inside it.

"Wow. Your cat is a strange one. All of Dyaho's siblings hate the carrier."

"I think he's just used to it. At your place, the cats hardly ever need to be corralled into carriers."

"Fair point." At Lafier's "place" — namely, the **Royal Palace of Clybh**, an artificial planetoid with living quarters spacious enough to comfortably accommodate 50,000 people — the cats were left to roam free.

"He'll forget all about me in no time," Jint smiled sadly.

"We don't expect even the cats to remember us."

"Which is well-advised."

"Now locked beside the target ship," interrupted the onboard speakers. "All passengers, please prepare at once to disembark."

"Shall we go, Jint?" said Lafier, rising to her feet.

The two of them, seen off by the **starpilots** of the *Baururh*, stepped off the carrycraft.

While atop the **personal transporter**, Lafier used that time to connect her **wristgear** to the site's **compucrystal net** to retrieve information regarding the new ship. She had, of course, been informed to an extent beforehand, but she needed to get a grasp on the latest info now while she could.

On a fundamental level, the new assault ship's crew wouldn't change. There were some deaths among the **NCCs**, as well as the injured in need of long-term recuperation. In addition, some had been discharged, returning to their home planets. Their replacements were already lined up. But the roster of **starpilots** remained the same as before, and it seemed they had already gathered together.

With the loading of fuel and supplies, and the last adjustments all complete, they could apparently take off whenever they wished to.

Having thus checked up on the ship's condition, Lafier noticed Jint was still with the cat.

"You forgot to drop him off, didn't you?" She couldn't help it if her tone sounded a little scolding. When it came time to input the destination into the **transporter**, Jint had directed it to take them to where the new ship was waiting, *Ruc Ceutematdana* (Repair Dock 127), without hesitation. Of course, Lafier didn't really attempt to hide that she was cross-examining him.

"Think of **Linewing** Ecryua," said Jint. "I think she'd want to tell Dyaho her final goodbyes. I'd *never* slowly whittle away at you until you agree to let him aboard."

"Good, because I can't stand being slowly whittled away at. Promise me you'll see to him."

"Sure thing," nodded Jint. Then, he laughed. "Looking back, ever since we boarded the *Basrogrh*, the only point of contention between us has revolved around a cat. It may be dumb of me to say this during wartime, but with us, things are peaceful."

"Maybe you feel at peace. And I *contend* that you never said you'd leave the cat aboard ship."

“Now that you mention it, that’s true.” Jint scratched his brown head of hair. “Well, I did have something to say, but what with the war and all, I thought I’d get serious, you know?”

“You blockhead.”

Jint changed the subject. “Speaking of which, did you hear the rumors about the new class of ship?”

“Yep.”

Word had it that **Military Command Headquarters** was planning to introduce a new class of ship, based on lessons learned in battles prior. Some were even whispering that the blueprints had already arrived at the *Bhoboth Ménhotr* (Warship Management Headquarters).

“Can you imagine? A heavy-class assault ship?”

“I heard it was a light-weight patrol ship.”

“Maybe it’s a ship that’s smack dab in the middle. But why would they deploy a half-baked ship like that?”

The assault ships we have now might be ‘half-baked,’ Lafier thought to herself. Perhaps assault ships were judged to be useless for the battles to come. That said, it would be a while yet before they would come face-to-face with the new class of ship. For the time being, they had to make do fighting in regular old assault ships.

“By the way, how is that a ‘speaking of which’?” asked Lafier.

“Huh? Oh, I was thinking maybe there’s room for a cat on a bigger ship...”

“You blockhead,” she repeated.

At last, the **transporter** had reached the *ruc* (repair dock). Inside, there was microgravity. Lafier’s new ship was floating there, encircled by a slew of tubes. Some steel cords connected the entrance to the dock to the assault ship. The steel cables had grips to use for locomotion. Lafier grabbed a grip and pushed the **button**. She was then hauled quickly over. Partway there, she released the grip and flew the rest of the way using inertia only. She could change direction or slow down by touching the steel cord with one or both of her military-issue

boots.

To the Abh, who were accustomed to weightlessness, this was hardly worthy of note, but if an inexperienced Lander attempted the same motions, they would only hurt themselves. All too aware that was the case, Jint held onto the grip the entire way.

Sobash was there to greet them in the **air lock room**, which was left open.

“Welcome back, **Captain**,” Sobash saluted smilingly. “And I commend you for your hard work as well, **Linewing** Lynn. The **accounting NCC** has been waiting impatiently for your return.”

“I’m sure she has a handle on everything, even without somebody like me around,” replied Jint.

“Yes, she told me as much. Yet it seems there are matters that have need of the **Clerk’s** approval. You have plenty of work piled up... Now then, **Captain**, right this way. The **Inspector Supervisor** and the **Deputy Starpilot** are awaiting you on the **bridge**.”

“Thank you for your trouble, **Senior Starpilot**.” Lafier breathed in the new-ship smell. It had inherited the name *Basrogrh*, and since it was exactly the same model, part of her could believe the *Basrogrh* had come back to life for her.

They entered the bridge, where stood **Mechanics Linewing** Samson and **Linewing** Ecryua.

“**Senior Starpilot**, the flag,” said Lafier.

“Yes, **Captain**. I will restore it.” Sobash presented a box, and she opened it. Out came the **ship’s banner** of the *Basrogrh*, the very same one she’d rescued from the vessel’s predecessor right before it exploded.

She hung up the **wasp**-design flag on the wall behind the Captain’s Seat.

This time, I’ll fight even more skillfully than before. You can count on it.

Then she spun back around to regard her subordinates. “It’s an honor to have you again.”

The four **starpilots** saluted it together.

“Now, prepare for takeoff!” she ordered. And so the starpilots headed for the door.

“What about the cat?” she heard Ecryua inquire.

She wasn’t asking where the cat was; her eyes were on the carrier in Jint’s hands.

“We’re not allowed to take him with us this time around,” said Jint. “So this is goodbye for the time being. Hang out with him now, if you’re willing.”

Ecryua pulled a sad expression. This was the first time they’d ever seen her make a face that stark.

“She’s of a strong conviction that bringing a cat to war is misguided,” said Jint, glancing repeatedly Lafier’s way.

“So you intend to paint me as the villain, I take it?” She narrowed her eyes at Jint, who was making every indication that this was all Lafier’s fault.

“No no, of course not,” Jint grinned ambiguously, looking at each of the Abh ladies in turn. “But, well... the facts are the facts.”

Epilogue

The **Royal Palace of *Clybh*** played host to a handful of gardens, yet the one that pleased Dyaho the most was the rock-laden garden. It had many nooks and crannies, and most importantly of all, no other cats staking territories. A cat's stomping grounds were sacred; he would admit no other cats, not even his siblings.

On that day, like all the others, he climbed up the rocky mountain, his stomach empty.

The rock garden was a structure with a hemispherical roof covering the ground. That roof always faced the opposite direction from the sun of Abliar, and so the view was always the starry skies.

Dyaho stood erect at the top of the mountain, and watched the stars with his big, amber eyes. It was often said that the creatures known as cats were unfeeling and forgetful, and they did indeed tend to be, but it wasn't as though their memories disappeared completely. Dyaho thought back to the days he spent aboard the **assault ship *Basrogrh***. The first face that sprung to mind was of the girl with the sky-blue hair. She had annoyed him from all of the excessive contact, but the way she combed his **striped** fur felt pleasant — almost like he was being stroked directly.

By contrast, the girl with a nostalgic scent and the bluish-black hair treated Dyaho with the utmost naturalness. She treated him like he was the wind, yet being by her side always seemed to be the most distant place from anxiety and fear.

Then he thought about the other people who stalked the *Basrogrh*, and finally, the housemate came to mind.

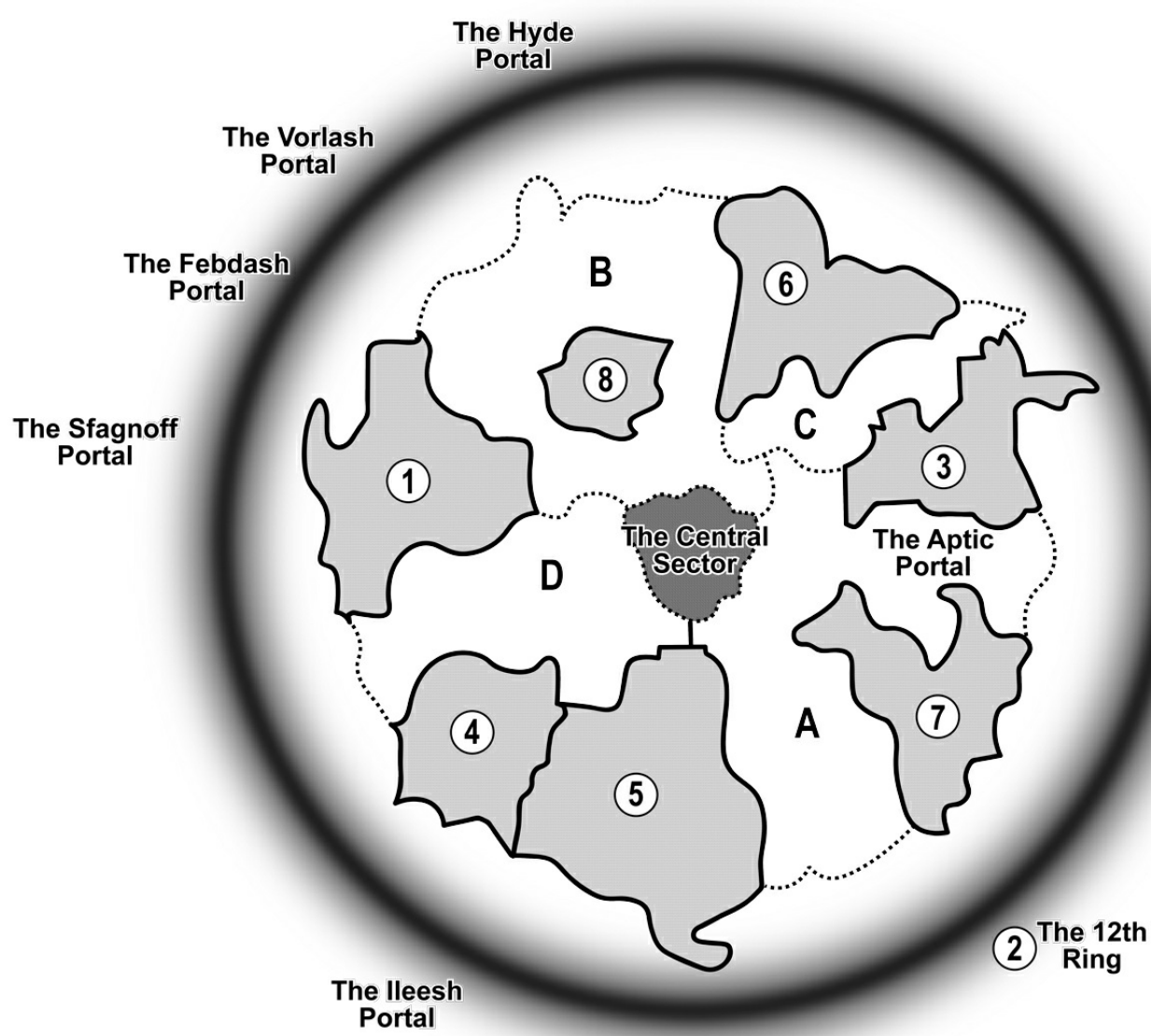
He wondered with worry whether the housemate, who seemed so bumbling to him, was doing okay by himself.

Yes, Dyaho fretted over the housemate. However, as all members of the cat

family were wont, he quickly tired of pondering these things.

Dyaho stretched with his forelimbs together, and yawned.

Planar Space Influence Map



- ① The Skeer (*Scirh*) Monarchy
- ② The Ileesh (*Ilich*) Monarchy
- ③ The Raseess (*Rasisec*) Monarchy
- ④ The Wesco (*Üescoc*) Monarchy
- ⑤ The Barkeh (*Barcœc*) Monarchy
- ⑥ The Bargzedeh (*Bargzedéc*) Monarchy
- ⑦ The Syoorgzedeh (*Siurgzedéc*) Monarchy
- ⑧ The Clyoov (*Clybh*) Monarchy

- A:** The United Humankind
- B:** The Hania Federation
- C:** The Greater Alkont Republic
- D:** The People's Sovereign Stellar Union

Appendix: Influence Map of Planar Space

This planar space influence map is not necessarily 100% accurate. In fact, it is a gross simplification of the current reality.

Imagine, if you will, that planar space is an ocean. Portals would then be small islands dotting it. These islands are of negligible area compared to the vast ocean. Now imagine the majority of those islands are uninhabited, but there are a few that aren't. One might say that a given interstellar power is an aggregation of these islands. As such, there are no clear boundary lines, as this map might lead you to believe.

There have been attempts, however, to divide up planar space. In other words, treaties were signed at several points to recognize the sovereignty of respective member-states over a circular area of a certain diameter centered around each portal leading to an inhabited star system. Yet the Humankind Empire of Abh lay ever outside the reach of the "international community," and due to their indifference with regard to these agreements, the divvying of planar space by dint of treatise ultimately came to no effect.

Instead, the boundary lines of planar space emerged organically, as a consequence of nature. In order to fully grasp how and why, please humor the following explanation of the basic physics at play.

There is a "point of inaccessibility" for ships navigating through planar space, but those ships' cruising ranges are actually much smaller even than that theoretical dead end, because it's calculated by assuming that the entirety of the absolute greatest amount of mass that can be contained in a single space-time bubble is converted into energy. Since ships in the real world exist to ferry things across space, people can hardly afford to allow cargo and passengers (or the ships themselves for that matter) to turn into energy.

Owing to this cruising range problem, ships navigating planar space need to resupply often. This means any sector that doesn't connect to a star system capable of resupplying a ship can't be crossed. This merciless physical law,

combined with each nation's will to persist, molded the influence boundaries of the present day.

If an interstellar power must use the portals of other countries to maintain contact between its own star systems, an emergency could very well break up its virtual domain. To avoid such perils, it must set a path connecting all of its star systems using its own portals. Consequently, each power's area of influence can be seen as a collection of navigation routes.

In addition, a ship's cruising range is swayed in no small part by the flow of space-time particles. Because dense currents of space-time particles gush out from the central sector of the Milky Way Portal-belts, if one navigates from the outer edges inward toward the core of the galaxy, they must sail against the stream, causing their trip to be slower and the distance travelled shorter. That current is the biggest obstacle to likening planar space to an ocean.

Perhaps it would serve you better, in this one case, to instead imagine a mountain.

In any case, I'd now like to draw your attention to the Ileesh Monarchy in the Twelfth Ring. You might assume that the ideal path to travel from the Hyde Portal to the Ileesh Portal involves crossing the center area. However, in order to do that, there needs to exist portals in the Tenth or Eleventh Rings connecting to resupply bases. Yet the area outside the Seventh Ring is as yet largely undeveloped, leaving traveling alongside the Twelfth Ring while taking space-time particles from the side as the only option. You are not to climb the mountain; you are instead to adopt the contour lines that make up the mountain as your paths.

Now I would like to inform you of the history of planar space to date in simple terms — and in terms of the characteristics of planar space.

The first humans to set foot into planar space did so through the Sumei Portal, belonging to the present-day Hania Federation. The Sumei Portal lies in the First Ring. Sumeinians quickly caught on that while traveling from there to the outer reaches was easy, the reverse was quite the challenge. Moreover, the planar space navigation technology of the time made it so that traversing the area between the First and Second Rings was next to impossible.

They decided thereupon to search for potential trading partners and places to settle along the First Ring, and it didn't take long for their efforts to bear fruit. A portal to a human-inhabited star system was discovered in the Twelfth Ring, which was to be a foothold for their explorations all the way out to the outer edges. Thus did Sumeinian technology reach the rest of humanity.

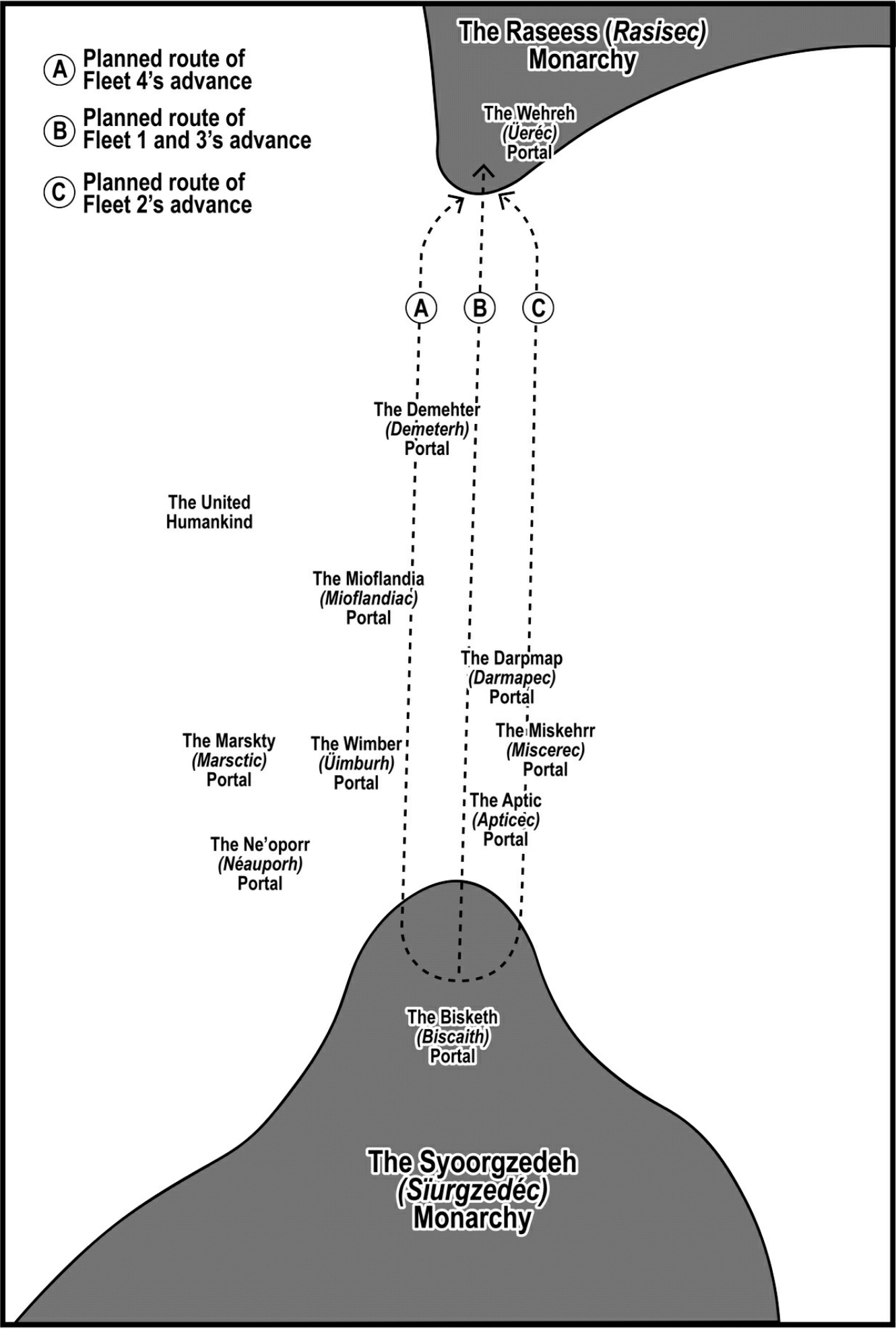
Meanwhile, since Sumeinians actively developed and settled planets, they formed the first interstellar power in human history. Then, the Abh entered planar space through their eight portals. By some strange vagary of fate, not a single one of those eight was to be found in the First Ring. This was rather a blessing in the eyes of the Abh, for if even just one portal into the Empire existed in the First Ring, they would have brushed paths with advanced star systems during their early stages, and given the temperament of the Kin of the Stars, those encounters could not have all been peaceful in nature. The Empire might have been snuffed out before it could bloom into the powerhouse it currently is. Luckily, the Abh plumbed planar space disconnected from advanced star systems, granting them the time necessary to build up the strength to rival their planar space precursors.

I don't have the space to elaborate on the history from that point on. To keep things short, the vicissitudes of destiny saw the rise and fall of various interstellar powers, leading to the present situation as depicted by the political map. Do mind that in actuality, as I stated earlier, the boundary lines are not so distinct, and there are places where they are in fact exceedingly vague. There are portals that seep into the domains of neighboring nations like enclaves. Furthermore, there are no portals between rings, which makes securing routes through inter-ring areas nonviable.

The reason that I present to you this map so akin to the map of a landworld is because a more technically accurate map was deemed to be counterproductively confusing.

Operation Phantom Flame Schematic

- Ⓐ Planned route of Fleet 4's advance
- Ⓑ Planned route of Fleet 1 and 3's advance
- Ⓒ Planned route of Fleet 2's advance



Afterword

And so it has finally begun.

First things first, let's clarify what BANNER OF THE STARS is in relation to the prior volumes, CREST OF THE STARS. It is not a sequel.

Chronologically speaking, it does come after the events of CREST, so I have taken to calling it a sequel when explaining it to people is too big a hassle, but in reality, BANNER is the main story. CREST was a side story.

I think writing the side story before the main story is pretty groundbreaking stuff, wouldn't you say?

So you can start reading the series without having read CREST first... is what I'd like to be able to say, but I regret to admit that if you haven't read CREST first, I think BANNER will be hard to follow. That's because, just as I stated in the afterword to Vol. III of CREST, it's also a guidebook — to the Abh race, to the interstellar empire they built, and to the fantastical science that called that empire into being. It exists to provide explanations for those kinds of elements. Think of it as a sort of primer. (Of course, it's not *just* a primer.)

For readers who don't know of CREST, or who read it but don't remember it well, I incorporated explanations that were as brief as allowable, without repeating things too at length, which would have been annoying to the people who read the previous installment and looked forward to the next book. To reiterate, I kept the repeated explanations extremely simple.

If you started the series from BANNER, may I (laughingly) suggest that picking up CREST OF THE STARS as well would make me very happy? To tell the truth, when I finished writing CREST, I thought to myself: *I don't have to write the continuation*. I even entertained the notion that it'd be better if I didn't. After all, though it's hard for me to say this myself, humble man that I am... that epilogue was a pretty good finale, wasn't it? Even now, I catch myself thinking that ending the entire series with that epilogue, despite the enormous world I'd created going to waste, would have been bold of me.

In reality, the possibility that the series wouldn't clear the commercial hurdle (which is to say, selling decently), and that it'd be forced to end at a mere three volumes, loomed large. And at that time, I resigned myself to be content with what I had accomplished should that come to pass. But to my delight, CREST received a warmer reception than I'd anticipated. It was far from a bestseller in the eyes of the wider public, but as a set of books pushed out by a relative unknown, it attracted a surprising amount of attention.

To me, the series was the product of various aims, both as SF and as novels in themselves, but it also derived from a business aim — the desire to step into the ring and punch out the “Winter of SF.” As such, I was able to taste a real sense of victory (an idea I find as comical as you do).

I am grateful to all of you readers, to everyone involved in the making of these books, and to the characters. Now that it's come to this, I hunger to depict more. While I was writing CREST, various different scenarios popped into my head. That story was complete after endeavoring to tie those scenarios together.

But at the same time, the episodes that ought to follow CREST also floated in my mind. Not just episodes, though — characters, fragments of lines and conversations, all sorts of things. And now I think I'd like to show you all of them. Thanks to you, the work of connecting all of these scenes has begun anew.

I do have my concerns as to whether they'll all fit together sufficiently neatly, but there's no doubt the work of getting there will be fun. I even have a last scene in mind.

Actually, I have two last scenes in mind. Which last scene you get, the plot will decide. Now, I have something to ask of you: Please, if the characters come to disaster or misfortune, don't blame the author!

With that, I have nothing else to say in this space about the beginnings of the series. I'll use the remaining space to explain just one thing about the volume you're reading. Some of you may be wondering why the word *sarérh* meant “ship commander” in CREST, but now also means “unit commander.” This was not a mistake. They're the same word in Baronh. And yes, the Japanese word

(“warship captain”) that was rendered as *sarérh* in CREST is rendered in this book as *manoüass*. That’s because in Baronh, the captain of a small warship is a *manoüass*, while the captain of a large warship is a *sarérh*. The commander of a corps of assembled small-size warships is also a *sarérh*.

Why did I make the terminology there that headache-inducing? Good question: your humble author doesn’t remember. I will engage in self-reflection regarding this matter. (Likely nothing will come of this self-reflection, as I often just leave it at that. That the lessons I learn gazing inward don’t affect my future actions is my biggest problem).

Speaking of the Baronh, a significant number of readers of CREST pointed out to me that its inclusion made the text hard to read. All of the Baronh has made editing, proofreading, producing, and printing the books a bigger ask than normal (and it has probably made reading the books a mite harder too, but that’s just readers reaping what they’ve paid for), which I do feel bad about, but if it’s making it a slog to read for you personally, I don’t mind at all if you just ignore the Baronh altogether. It’s not as though it’s there to help you understand goings-on. It’s purely ancillary. I see Baronh as a work of fiction in itself, and take pride in my ability to give rise to such a conlang.

That being said, whether or not you enjoy fictional languages is a matter of personal preference, and nothing more. In fact, I feel as though precious few readers find any enjoyment in it. That’s why it’s no mystery to me that there are those among you who think of it as “hard to read.”

Lastly, I have received many opinions and questions revolving around CREST. At first, I fully intended to reply to every letter, but the lazy and sloppy personality that’s been my curse since I was born got in the way of that, and I’ve failed to pay due courtesy to the fans as a result. I apologize. I assure you, however, that I am storing your letters with the utmost care, as I treasure them, and re-read them when the occasion arises. If you can stand a schmo like me who might not write back, then by all means, send me your thoughts.

If possible, I’d like to deliver BANNER OF THE STARS II to you around spring. Don’t take that as a promise. This is just me thinking it’d be swell if I could get it out by springtime, with no real reason to think I will be able to (*why am I doing this to myself?*). I don’t think it’ll take too long to get to you either way, but I

can't say I'm faster than average at pounding out the script, either.

In any case, I'll be hoping that you enjoy this tale that's really only just begun.

November 10, 1996



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Banner of the Stars: Volume 1

by Hiroyuki Morioka

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